RENOUNCEMENT IN DANTE

By

SISTER MARY ROSE GERTRUDE

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C.S.C., A.M.

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TO
ONE WHO EVER HELD THE SPIRIT OF
RENOUNCEMENT AS A
TOUCHSTONE FOR ALL CONDUCT
ONE GONE ON TO CLAIM HIS PARADISO
MY FATHER
THOMAS WHALEN

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PREFACE

THE PRESENT attempt to analyse the fibre of Catholic poetry through the comparative study of major and minor poets, Catholic and non-Catholic, has been growing for a long time. It is presented in the desire to awaken interest in the texture of poetry; for the author believes that the conception of a specific poetic fibre, as distinctive as the fibre of linen or wool or silk, is new.

It is the hope of the author to widen among Catholics an interest in Dante. Volumes and series of volumes of commentary have been written upon Alighieri. Books of discussion, books of interpretation and of translation have been published. Great quarto tomes, and little vestpocket editions have appeared; and finally, lives of commentators, biographers, and critics of Dante have been added in the English language to the Dante libraries. But these publications are, for the most part, from the pens of non-Catholic writers.

This is unfair to Dante; for a stranger to Catholic doctrine feels the fibre of Catholic

poetry as through a glove, vaguely; and he brings with him, consciously or unconsciously, the disesteem due to lack of sympathetic deference. Other things being equal, a Hebrew should be the best interpreter of Hebrew literature; a native American should be the best judge in a dispute between his fellow citizen and an alien as to what is meant by the American when he uses a current phrase. Catholics have this native advantage in the study of Dante. Yet the English contribution of Catholic pens to Dante studies is but a meagre one.

The author offers this book, then, with no apology for having presumed to enter the illustrious and erudite company of Dante commentators. The preparation of the work has been a joy; and there remains the hope that this little volume may lead other lovers of beauty into the great realms of the *Divina Commedia;* particularly, into the wondrous, neglected *Paradiso.*

In presenting this book to the public the author desires to express her debt of gratitude to Miss Genevieve Walton of the Michigan State Normal College and to Sister M. Angelita of the Holy Cross Order from both of whom it was her privilege frequently to receive valuable assistance and constructive criticism.

To build up a complete bibliography would not be useful. Only those works that were of

positive value in the preparation of this book have been included. The list is placed at the end of the volume rather than at chapter ends to avoid needless repetition. The Dante quotations, throughout, are taken from the Temple Classics edition of *The Inferno, The Purgatorio,* and *The Paradiso.*

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RENOUNCEMENT IN DANTE

CHAPTER I

THE SPIRIT OF RENOUNCEMENT IS THE FIBRE OF CATHOLIC POETRY

POETRY in general may be colored by circumstance, and formed to fancy; but the elements of which it is made are substances of specific personal quality. The religion of a man is the sponsor of his soul; and the soul of the poet is the father of his poem. In the font of the author's mind is reflected the world; from the fibre of his heart is woven his poetry to the pattern of this pictured universe. Every worthy life could inspire an epic; but as lives differ in essentials, the poetic expression of each is individual. The influences of race and climate have long been recognized as manifest in all types of literature, and particularly in poetic expression. Religion, too, is a potent factor in the choice of material and in determining the philosophy of a poem.

Pondering the varieties of poetic expression one finds something which may be called the essence of poetry. It permeates the atmosphere,

rises from the newly turned sod, throbs in the throats of song birds, glows in the arching rain-bow, and looks out of the eyes of innocents. This element is everywhere, and yet it is so intangible that none but the poet can grasp it. It is difficult of definition but during this consideration we shall look upon it as

> The soul of a thought by poet caught
> And crystaled into phrase;
> The heart of a man transparent wrought
> And held for the world to gaze;
> The echoed song of the stars untaught,
> A flame, or a glowing blaze.

With this understanding, we shall try to find a distinguishing quality between the concept caught by the Catholic poet and that of the non-Catholic Christian. Were we searching among the works of poets, whose religion is unknown, to discover the Catholics among them, we might first reject the names of all who express a search for religious conviction. The Catholic adult, like the Jew, is notably satisfied with the fundamentals of universal truth found in the religion in which his early mind unfolded. When religious problems present themselves, there is, for each, a solution at hand in the dogma of his Church.

The expression of doubt and fear in one's spiritual outlook, artistic matter though it is,

finds no expression in Catholic poetry. But this negative distinction is of little value since religious assurance finds expression from believers in every creed.

Even the paying of homage to the Mother of God is not distinctively Catholic. Did not Wordsworth lay a perfect wreath at the feet of "Our tainted nature's solitary boast"? There still remains, however, a common field of poetic expression as broad as the sky, as deep as the human heart, as high as the summit of souls. In it one delights in fragrance, color, love, and freedom; and it is in the interpretation of freedom that the student recognizes, with somewhat of certitude, the Catholic.

The mark that Catholics have put upon their poetry without deliberation, while children of the Reformation have unconsciously or deliberately omitted it, is the imprint of renouncement: the Sign of the Cross. Not otherwise may the reader distinguish the Catholic from the non-Catholic poet. The Jew and the Pagan have retained the old idea of sacrifice; and their poetry like that of the Catholic reflects the spirit of renouncement. The Reformation, from the first moment of its inception, substituted for the idea of personal sacrifice the belief that the death of the Redeemer was all-sufficing for

those who trust and love Him. Altars were removed from churches, soon divorces were granted, the commandments of the old Church, with their restrictions, were rejected as Pope-imposed shackles and there went abroad the idea that Faith alone was sufficient. A new Freedom was born, a freedom which meant absence of restraint to desire. Freedom to the old school of poets had meant absence of obstacles to the will. The domination of that will over every opposing force, even over personal inclination, was their notion of absolute human freedom. It is the Catholic definition of freedom today.

Religion forms life, and poetry reflects life. The trend of living, the attitude toward freedom in life, is sometimes directly expressed in poetry and often connoted. Where one finds the brilliant fire-rocket of uncurbed desire, breaking against the very sky and falling in a rain of star dust, he may with reason doubt the Catholicity of the author. Does he on the contrary find the strength of action exerted inwardly restraining turbulent desire, the poet may be presumed to be a Catholic.

This distinction is the logical result of two specific types of thought-habit. To a member of the old Church, time honored custom has surrounded the prescribed prohibitions with the

dignity of unchanging and unquestioned circumstance. Meat is denied on certain days as it has been denied for centuries; attendance at Sunday's Mass is of strict obligation; kinship, even spiritual, bars the rites of Matrimony; divorce in the sense of modern interpretation is forbidden; once a year Confession is required. The Catholic looks upon the successful practice of his faith as upon the ultimate control of physical desire and of temporal ambition lest either endanger eternal happiness. The Catholic poet has shown preference for the spirit of renouncement as the invigorating element of his theme. To the non-Catholic such real obedience to law, as that required by the Church, is bondage, voluntary or enforced; such obedience affected is hypocrisy.

The poetry of these opposed philosophies should differ. Let us examine the work of Catholic poets from different ages and environment to discover whether the Church puts the same stamp upon her poet children in the present day as that she gave in the distant centuries. In looking *Upon the Book and Picture of the Seraphic Saint Teresa,* Crashaw in 1634 prayed:

> By all of Him that is in thee
> Leave nothing of myself in me.
> Let me so read thy life, that I
> Unto all life of mine may die.

Three hundred years after Crashaw, Lionel Johnson wrote a fervent song in perfect harmony with this prayer of his great predecessor. In his *Dark Angel* we find the same determined effort toward self-renunciation through personal combat with the tempter of souls:

> I fight thee in the Holy Name
> Yet what thou dost is what God saith;
> Tempter! should I escape the flame
> Thou wilt have helped my soul from death.

Both poems illustrate the spirit of joy at victory over certain strong cravings.

The spirit of renouncement of personal desire is more readily recognized after the study of a poem like Rossetti's *The Blessed Damozel* wherein such spirit is notably lacking. In it the soul of a loved one is transported to Heaven. Torn from the companionship of her human lover, she turns her back on the great choirs and the perfect love of Heaven's compelling Presence while she searches our distant sphere for some trace of the man of her affections. Still clinging to the personal desire, still unwilling to relinquish her destiny to the hands of her Creator, she leans over the balcony, gazing below

'Til her bosom's pressure must have made
The bar she leaned on warm.

Dante, the Catholic, weaves of a different fibre when he pictures his Beatrice snatched to Heaven. Robbed of the possibility of her society her lover is sad but he pictures her joyously absorbed in her new Home. He loses interest in all things earthly and he studies the place of her new abode. His first glimpse of her in Heaven is a profile view. The blessed one is turned from earth, gazing to her left and upward, toward the sun, with the unflinching eye of an eagle, all absorbed:

Gazing upon her, such I became within as was Glaucus, tasting of the grass that made him The sea-fellow of the other gods.[1]

Later she explains to Dante the power that has drawn him unimpeded into Heaven:

Marvel were it in thee if, bereft of all impediment, thou hadst settled down below; even as were stillness on earth in a living flame. Thereon toward Heaven she turned back her gaze.[2]

In the hands of Dante, all things bend, unresisting, before the recognized, unquestioned will of the Designer of Destinies.

The same contrast is evident in the poetic expressions of Milton and Tabb in regard to

[1] *Paradiso* I, 67. [2] *Ibid.*, I, 139.

blindness. The black curtain which separates the sightless from the rest of the world is not wholly unlike the impassable wall that stands between the living and the dead. Through this barrier a blind man may grope; but if he has lived in light, he misses its warming reassurance upon his surroundings, as a grieved one mourns a lover, as an exile craves his home. Milton felt that the deprivation of his vision was the robbing him of a right; Tabb accepted "the school of darkness" as a part of his training. The frustrating of Milton's literary ambitions caused his stricken soul to cry out in the celebrated *Sonnet on his Blindness*:

When I consider how my light is spent,
  Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
  And that one talent which is death to hide,
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
  My true account, lest He returning chide;
  "Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?"
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
  That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best
  Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best; His state
  Is kingly: thousands at His bidding speed,
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;
  They also serve who only stand and wait."

Our present problem is not whether every Catholic, through the compulsion of his religion, would accept a like cross with greater

resignation; it is not whether he could express his thought in better style or diction than the great non-Catholic master of word and rhythm. The present consideration is upon the Catholic poet's expressed regard of the cross. A questioning attitude toward Providence is to him a dwarfed thing. Without reasoning upon the matter, the Catholic simply omits such challenge from his poetry. He looks upon the questioning of God's right as futile rebellion, and futile rebellion, unlike a lost cause, is seldom in itself artistic. Had Milton rendered the first line of his sonnet in the past tense:

When I considered how my light was spent

the attention of the reader would move with the author from the impulse to rebellion against God to the personal conquest of that weakness in judgment. Milton knew every craft of his art; had he considered renouncement more beautiful than protest he would have made it so appear.

John Bannister Tabb made no pretentions to the heights of Milton's unsurpassable style; but because he was a blind poet who made the subject of his affliction the title of a poem, we include it here:

Back to the primal gloom
Where life began,
As to my mother's womb,

Must I a man,
Return.
Not to be born again
But to remain
And in the school of darkness learn
What mean
The things unseen.

In the same spirit does the Catholic Dryden lay fame upon the sacrificial pyre:

If joys hereafter must be purchased here
With loss of all that mortals hold so dear,
Then welcome infamy and public shame,
And, last, a long farewell to earthly fame. . .
Down then, thou rebel, never more to rise;
And what thou didst, and dost so dearly prize,
That fame, that darling fame, make that thy sacrifice.[3]

Again Seumas McManus in the poem *In Dark Hour* voices the spirit of brave acceptance of a tragedy in life:

I set my face to the gray wild wastes,
I bend my back to the load—
Dear God, be kind with the heart-sick child
Who steps on the Lonely Road.

Alice Meynell's *Renouncement* which pictures a battle with impulse, strong and insistent, is expressive of a yet deeper spirit of self discipline in that it avows submission with no compulsion other than the will of the person tempted:

[3] *The Hind and the Panther*, III, line 280.

Oh, just beyond the sweetest thoughts that throng
The thought of thee awaits, hidden yet bright,
But it must never, never, come to sight;
I must stop short of thee the whole day long.

The reader when he thus stands face to face with a soul that has vanquished human desire for the sake of God's law feels a thrill akin to that known on meeting a conqueror of men.

Matthew Arnold, a non-Catholic poet, in *Self Dependence* takes counsel from the stars whose magnificence makes them sufficient unto themselves:

Unaffrighted by the silence round them,
Undistracted by the sights they see,
These demand not that the things without them
Yield them love, amusement, sympathy.

Here is exemplified greatness of spirit; here is deliberate renouncement of personal, immediate desire for the sake of a more remote good. This closely approximates the Catholic spirit of renouncement; but the sacrifice herein shown is not "a whole burnt offering" to and for the honor of a Supreme Being. The last two lines of the poem bring the reader back to the purpose of this renouncement of such pleasures as the mind and heart might seek from fellow beings:

Resolve to be thyself; and know that he,
Who finds himself, loses his misery!

We are back again to the two philosophies as yet distinct between the Catholic and the Protestant Churches. The one asserts that Heaven was opened through the Redemption leaving man free to earn his entrance there by sacrifice; the other affirms that Heaven was purchased by the Redemption; and no further sacrifice is necessary on the part of man. This is the key to the analysis.

Similar to *Renouncement* is Caroline Giltinan's *Achievement,* in which we find:

> The biggest thing I ever did
> Was all inside of me;
> There was a battle hardly won
> With only God to see.

"Rare Ben Jonson," who was a Catholic for some years, wrote a prayer of thanksgiving for adversity:

> If Thou hadst not
> Been stern to me
> But left me free
> I had forgot myself and Thee.

Then Fortune, in the person of James I, smiled on him; he left the Church and wrote no more in the strain of one grateful for the opportunity of sacrifice.

Singers outside the Church, as well as those within it, may know the magic skill of fitting phrases, may employ the tricks of style that

make them masters in expression; they may even project their minds into any circumstance which they can fully understand. But sacrifice, the intertexture of Catholic poetry, is to them an unlovely thing unworthy the caress of the gentle muse of poesy. Keats had to sacrifice much; but he saw no beauty in the apparently grudging fate which forbade his entering the promised land of a long life among appreciative friends. He thought that stern facts required stern prose for their expression:

> But was there ever any
> Writhed not at passing joy?
> To know the change and feel it,
> Where there is none to heal it,
> Nor numbered sense to steal it;
> Was never said in rhyme.

Oscar Wilde did not continuously practise the Catholic religion; but from his pen we have an exquisite expression of the Catholic view of atonement. We may employ it as a Catholic's reply to Keats:

> Ah! happy those whose hearts can break
> And peace of pardon win!
> How else may man make straight his plan
> And cleanse his soul from sin?
> How else but through a broken heart
> May Lord Christ enter in?

Even the lesser poets, even the makers of rhyme, outside the Church are distinguished from those within it in the same way. The Byzantine artist and the Roman painter had different standards of beauty; each had his untrained imitators. So with the minor poets, Catholic and non-Catholic, their standards of judgment have been dominated by the cultured craftsmen of their time: when they attempt creative art, their crude efforts take on the spirit of whatever master artist formed their respective tastes.

To every Catholic there is an acknowledgment that the most far reaching beautiful truths are those associated with sacrifice. Poets outside the Catholic Church for the most part choose other subjects for their muse. Burns, Scott, the Brownings, Milton, Byron, Shelley, and Keats have all pictured for us a realm of wondrous beauty. In it are mountains and castles, daisy-dotted swards, skylarks in the morning horizon, wreaths of love held by sea-nymphs, and gods bowing down before God; but in these authors, writing after the establishment of the Reformation days in England, is found no expression of personal renouncement. Gladness, sorrow and remorse are there; and joy abides in scenes so entrancing that on one occasion

> The sun on the hill forgot to die
> And the lily revived and the dragon-fly
> Came back to dream on the river.

It is delightful reading, and at first the critic may miss no poetic element. During this period there was frequently expressed in non-Catholic poetry a soul yearning and a perplexity of mind in things spiritual. This matter made a literature of gripping interest.

In later years there began to grow in some of the sects a revival of regard for the cross as a symbol; altars were again established in some Protestant churches, and the idea of sacrifice was reintroduced into their doctrine. As the spirit of the Anglican Church approaches that of the Catholic the deeper poets of modern times are weaving religious poems with a fibre more and more similar to that of the Catholic bard.

In Catholic poetry through the centuries the cross has been erected in many, many places as a thing to be loved and cherished. Like wayside shrines here or there in a niche by an ancient roadside, or on the wall of an oldfashioned home, sacrifice, sacrifice, sacrifice repeats itself in old Catholic poetry and new. The earliest example that we note in the English language is a translation. Its title is *Holy Cross,* and it is credited to Merton College. It is an Old Eng-

lish rendition of the Latin hymn *Dulce Lignum.* In it we find:

> Sweet be the nails
> And sweet be the tree,
> And sweeter the Burden that hangs upon thee.

But we do not speak, necessarily, of poems specifically religious in nature; rather, it is our purpose to direct attention to an ethical attitude toward every phase of life, as interpreted by Catholic poetry from the time of Chaucer to the present day. There is pathetic beauty in the picture of the little schoolboy done to death by Jews, in the *Prioress' Tale* of Chaucer. The lad foresaw the danger to himself in his singing the *Alma Redemptoris Mater,* and welcomed the peril:

> Al be I . . . shal be ybete thryes in an hour
> I wil it con, Our Lady for to honour.

Gerard Hopkins, in his glimpse of Heaven itself through *The Starlight* sees it as a sacrifice-investment:

> Look at the stars! Look, look up at the skies!
> O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!
> . . . Ah well! it is a purchase and a prize.
>
> Buy then! Bid then!—Prayer, patience, alms, vows.—
> . . . This peace-bright paling hides the Spouse
> Christ, and the Mother of Christ and all His hallows.

From Southwell to Kilmer the same spirit carries through. Not all Catholics represent the cross as a thing cheerfully embraced, or even willingly accepted; but at least a final and complete resignation marks the end of the struggle. Let us attend to Francis Thompson's romance of weakness and the Love Divine that conquered. He enacts his life. We see him kneeling beneath the cross itself, as a boy just out of the home garden-of-paradise. Duty and Sacrifice kneel beside him for a moment; suddenly he rises and hastily leaves them there. Attempting to justify himself with himself, he passes out of the small circle of selflessness repeating the fear in his heart:

> Lest having Him, I must have naught beside.

The old St. Michael war is on within his soul. Thompson's allegiance is divided; his spirit is weak, and his body is slothful. His mind is hungry for happiness and the poet tastes every compound so labeled. Nowhere can he find the ripe, sweet fruit of sacrifice which his soul craves, because he has not permitted the seed to take root in his soul. He tries one diversion after another, his frightened conscience calling, meanwhile, after the runaway chariot of his wayward impulse. God follows close upon his path and forces unwilling sacrifice

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where there should have been renouncement. Thompson complains:

> . . . if one little casement opened wide
> The gust of His approach would clash it to.
> Fear wist not to evade as Love wist to pursue.

Human consolation denied him, he steps down to inanimate creation in his search:

> Against the red throb of its sunset-heart
> I laid my own to beat,
> And share commingling heat;
> But not by that, by that, was eased my human smart;
> In vain my tears were wet on Heaven's gray cheek.
> For ah! we know not what each other says,
> These things and I; in sound I speak—
> Their sound is but their stir, they speak by silences.

Conquered at last, he turns to his God; he yields what little he has left to give, and it is accepted. God and His broken child walk back to the little plot of peace and sacrifice, where the briar is in plenty, and its stem is ugly to behold; but to the Catholic its bloom is fragrant, its roots have power to warm the earth, and its fruits are unmistakably sweet.

We are distracted from this scene by the heavy voice from without the land of Christian Poetry. Looking into the distant lowlands we note a man quite knee-deep in boggy mire. Intoxicated by a fatal draught of modernistic thought, Whitman, Prince of License, is singing in robust defiance:

I think I could turn and live with the animals, they
are
So placid and self-contained;
I stand and look at them long and long . . .

They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their
sins;
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to
God . . .

Not one of them is respectable or industrious over
the whole earth.

There is a picture utterly selfish, and, to many Catholics utterly revolting. Then rises the voice of Aubrey De Vere. He is condemning this type of expression in a couplet entitled *Recent Poetry*:

We looked for peach and grape bunch drenched with
dew—
He served us up the dirt in which it grew.

At the other side we hear Alice Meynell speaking of her *Shepherdess of Sheep*:

Her flocks are thoughts. She keeps them white,
She guards them from the steep.
. . . She is so circumspect and right
She has her soul to keep.

Continuing, we move toward a church whence come notes of an organ throbbing the praise of God. It ceases before we reach the threshold of the chapel, and we learn from Charles L. O'Donnell that the "quivering

hands" of the saintly brother organist have ceased to make music upon earth. The author says of his fellow religious that he was

> The player and the played upon,
> He was the actor and the acted on,
> God played on him as he upon the keys,
> Moving his soul to highest melodies
> Of lowly serving, hid austerities.

The highest praise given the great musician by his friend is that the man surrendered himself to the will of his Creator. Thus we observe that death in this realm takes on a different aspect from that displayed in *Lycidas* and *Adonais*. Music itself is not the theme; nor does the poem become an idle lament because the chilled fingers play no more; rather is renouncement, in the life of the deceased, stressed as a source of consolation to surviving friends:

> God played on him as he upon the keys.

Life in many modes passes within the ken of every seer's mentality; but no mind carries away the whole of any event. The blooms of the hillside mean one thing to one poet, another thing to another. They hold still a different significance to the honey bee; and to the sheep at pasture they mean food. It is not that one takes away with him more of the flower than does the other; but he takes a

different substance. And from the fibre of the consequent growth of that element which each poet takes unto his soul, he weaves his dreams.

It may not be a matter of remark that priests and members of religious orders value mortification and write of it; for after all it should be the life-spring of their action. Churches are builded to shelter sacrificial altars, and churchmen live within the atmosphere of prayer. Let us revisit the homes of Catholic laymen and seek renouncement there as a distinctive poetic quality. Can bliss of union between two human hearts know renouncement and continue to exist? Is there place for austere restraint in a dwelling of satisfied love? Does any poet consider such a picture beautiful? We enter first the home of Coventry Patmore, whose ideal wife is presented thus:

> As lowly as a wife can be,
> Her manners when they call me lord,
> Remind me 'tis a courtesy; . . .
> Because, though free of the outer court
> I am, this temple keeps its shrine
> Sacred to Heaven; because, in short,
> She's not and never could be mine.

T. A. Daly, in *The Sanctum,* records a sacred plea:

> Lord, God of Love, who givest me
> Her heart of fire,
> Though mine the honeyed tenderness

. . . I pray Thee make
Thy shrine within its core,
Let me before one close-sealed door
Cry, "Non sum dignus" o'er and o'er
For her dear sake.

The spirit of renouncement animates these poems with a sweet reverence, and glows in their poetic expression. There is strong determined renunciation in a Christian's offering of his heart of hearts to the God of his love.

Would you see humble duty in the home of Nazareth? It is pictured in Katherine Tynan Hinkson's linnet song about St. Joseph, *The Man of the House,*

. . . I see you rise at the dawn and light
The fire and blow till the flame is bright.
I see you take the pitcher and carry
The deep well-water for Jesus and Mary.

Every variety of sacrifice in the home is shown in the realm of Catholic poetry. Padraic Pearse, "the dreamer who died for his dream," introduces us to a brave mother of brave sons who died for a noble cause.

I do not grudge them, Lord, I do not grudge
My two strong sons that I have seen go out
To break their strength and die, they and a few,
In bloody protest for a glorious thing,
—Lord, Thou art hard on mothers;
We suffer in their coming and their going;
And though I grudge them not, I weary, weary
Of the long sorrow; and yet I have my joy:
My sons were faithful and they fought.

Has no non-Catholic, then, treated the theme of sacrifice? In recent years, yes. As a rare example we have quoted Gilbert K. Chesterton who as a non-Catholic wrote:

> Tie in a living tether
> The prince and priest and thrall;
> Bind all our lives together
> Smite us and save us all.

It was fitting that this skilful wielder of the paradox should have written Catholic poetry and remained outside the Church, fitting for paradox, but not for an earnest soul. Standing on the threshold of the Church, he found the keynote of his song in harmony with the throb of the organ peal within, and entered. There are other High Church singers dangerously near the open door.

What is to be said of Longfellow and Tennyson? Merely that they took old Catholic themes which appealed to them and presented them anew with much of the spirit of sacrifice removed. They do not seem to have originated any poems of sacrifice. They did not set aside all idea of renouncement; this would destroy an intrinsic part of the old tales, the fibre itself, that could not be removed without ruining the fabric. Detach the enormous capability of sacrifice from the strong men in the old King Arthur tales and the stories lose their appeal.

Tennyson had a seeing eye and a feeling heart, but he had not the Catholic sense of renouncement. Thus, in his presentation, the pictures lost much of their old spirit though the laureate was a master artist. There is a worthy distinction between being virtuous and attending Mass, and being virtuous through attending Mass. That is the point which the non-Catholic misses and Tennyson missed it. He translated a masterpiece, enlarged the setting of the song and story which the conquered in the old days wove about the memory of vanquished leaders. The Holy Grail, the central figure, was to the mediæval mind directly symbolized in the Chalice of mediæval sacrificial worship. This thought, vital in their interpretation, was lost on the non-Catholic poet, although the picturesque quality in the stories of simple faith appealed to the artist in him. He did not altogether discard the spirit of the Middle Ages; color cannot be torn from a garment. The men of his theme swore by the Mass, their most worthy possession, and Lancelot dismounted at the hermitage when the bell summoned the faithful to morning service. This Tennyson related. The Mass, however, as he presents it, is but an accident in their lives, not a necessary part of their existence. Here, in the presentation of a Catholic theme, the stranger lost its spirit.

The Catholic poet in writing poems of majesty, soul-poems touching the essentials of life, senses a lack of fullness in their structure if they are without the element of renouncement. Not every poem from a Catholic pen directly expresses this element, but it is seldom wholly absent.

Poets, Catholic and non-Catholic, have given literature richness: imagery vivid as flame, and rhythm cheering as music. They have transmitted fragrance to the printed page and, bidding us voyage with them on the clouds, they have tapped on the outer gates of Paradise.

Side by side Catholic and Protestant poets have woven the fabrics of their dreams, their visions and their hopes; the Catholic has employed the fibre of restrained desire, while without it his neighbor has wrought with an element less strong. He who first took the crucifixes from their wayside shrines and the altars from their churches, snatched also an element from poetry which the Catholic includes.

Where there are altars of sacrifice in churches there are bound to grow sacrificial shrines in the hearts of men. Poetry, the language of the heart, will weave itself with the element of renouncement if that element is strong in the soul.

CHAPTER II

THE SPIRIT OF RENOUNCEMENT IN THE LIFE OF DANTE

RENUNCIATION, oldfashioned Beatitude doctrine, is idealistic, impracticable, unpopular. Dante Alighieri, alert, keen, intent, with the eye of an eagle and the nose of a bird of prey, was not by nature given to renunciation: at the age of nine he had made choice of a wife; at the age of eighteen he had not changed his mind; Beatrice received his sonnets platonically, yet he saw no other possible bride until after her death when he was twenty-five years of age.

The expressed affection of Beatrice was the first great renouncement which the Shepherd of Souls forced from the author of the *Divine Comedy:* the first of a long series of blocked ambitions which finally caused the great Florentine to raise his eyes above the temples and beyond the walls of fortified cities to The Place of Rest for Tired Souls. Let us follow the path of his shattered ambitions to observe the growth of renouncement in his character.

When twenty-five years old, Dante looked at life through events, not through life at events. He learned to abstract, from the succession of confused incidents, certain things that do not change with time; his mind rested at this early age on the problems behind and beyond the present. But today was here and it held its demands. He would marry, he would make a home: and, although he could offer to no other woman the ideal love, which he had given irrevocably to Beatrice, he took the advice of friends and married. This was to be his second great disappointment and he seems never to have sought advice again. Whether pride or humility placed a restraining hand on the pen of the poet we do not know; but we may surmise from his silence concerning her, that his helpmate added little to his earthly joy. Suffice it to say that she did not share his banishment and that in the *Divine Comedy* he perpetuated neither her memory nor that of her children.

Yet, while in exile, he missed his home with its familiar haunts and comforts of association. It grieved him to see his family torn by diverse allegiance and his sensitive heart knew anguish on hearing the final decision of his children to remain with their mother and her people while their stricken father went alone into a strange land.

In *Il Paradiso,* Dante makes reference to the wrench of this parting when he puts into the prophecy of Cacciaguida the words:

> Thou shalt abandon everything beloved most dearly: this is the arrow which the bow of exile shall first shoot.[1]

It is interesting to note that he was making his way, with rapid strides, along ambition's road to political power when this arrow struck him. Society, with its empty gaiety and mirth, had held no attraction for him at any time. Villani in the *Croniche Fiorentine* describes him as "careless of grace and not easy in his converse with laymen."

But his active mind had found on the sea of politics a sufficient number of complicated tasks to satisfy his unmeasured energy. Some pilots of the Ship of State glory in passing through the heart of a storm. Dante's spirit was not the type that would lie at anchor waiting for a calm outlook. Difficulty ahead, was to him, no cause for hesitancy; a contest of rapid judgments, the measure of his power of conviction and a test of executive ability were incentives to hazard. With every nerve on tension the great mind of the statesman had been pleased. It would now take much popular approval to quench his old thirst for love, but he would

[1] *Paradiso,* XVII, 58.

gain it; it would require much charity to satisfy his longing to give personal devotion, he would spend his life for patriotism.

The problems of Florence absorbed him still. He had painted a glorious future for his beloved city and he had pictured himself enthroned in the hearts of his fellow citizens. His first step in public life was a prudent one: his enrollment in The Guild of Physicians and Apothecaries, a fraternity whose members were wealthy and potential factors in the government. He reached the culmination of his power when elected one of the six priors to serve two months as the governing body of the city.

The other members recognized the vigorous intellect of Alighieri as exceptional; yet their reverence for his far, clear vision, his sure judgment and his generous spirit did not blind them to the fact that Dante also was fully convinced of the comparative value of his mind with theirs. It was suggested that one of their number be sent to Rome on an embassy of importance. Was it bitterness or a glint of real humor that permitted them to record his reply?

If I go who remains: if I stay who goes? [2]

Six hundred years have dispelled the bitterness, and to the modern reader there is left only

[2] *Dante and His Biographers*, Moore, p. 141.

the sparkle of pure fun. But at that fateful moment a grimace and an exchange of glances went round the table. Had Dante been less sure of himself he would have noted it. The determination that flamed in each indignant face soon provided Dante with the leisure and experience which crystallized in the *Divine Comedy* to mirror eternity. The bow of exile was bent. Florence would prove its power to exist and prosper without the genius. Had he paused in the blind fury of the first attack when the frenzied arrows of opposition struck him he might have seen his error; he might have heard the same footfall that followed Francis Thompson six centuries later when he strayed on the path of obstinacy.

Great talent is prone to self worship. A genius, knowing himself to be a mental giant, craves the homage due to him from lesser minds. In Dante, as in Thompson, a vast conceit had taken growth. Each in his own way "fled Him, down the nights and down the days." [3] Each too was strengthened by having to make

> trial of how salt doth taste
> another's bread, and how hard to descend
> and mount another's stair.[4]

The shock of exile left Dante at first benumbed, dazed, despairing. He hurled invec-

[3] *The Hound of Heaven,* I. [4] *Paradiso,* XVII, 58.

tives at his enemies, he questioned Providence. But he had a great capacity to endure and finally, in the spirit of personal renouncement, he, like a chosen soul, made a brave acceptance of the will of God.

In answering the "prophecy" of Cacciaguida, the humbled man makes reply:

> Well do I see, my father, how time cometh spurring toward me to give me such a buffet as is heaviest to whoso most abandoneth himself.[5]

Here, in the manner of his acceptance of this stroke of ill fortune, is the key to his new character. He armed himself for the danger, not with weapons of defense for his body nor his property; he put armor upon his spirit. Thus accoutred he would protect his soul from despair when the temporal possessions of life should be taken from him. Deliberately he turned within to find, there, the strongest power on which he could rely:

> Wherefore with foresight it were well to arm me that if the dearest place be reft from me, I lose not all the rest by reason of my songs.[6]

"All the rest!" At last, after the possibility of material success is wrested from his hands, he sees the "all" which had been cut from his

[5] *Paradiso,* XVII, 106. [6] *Ibid.,* XVII, 109.

view by the dazzling splendor of earthly achievement. As his vision clears his determination is strengthened: he will save his soul by his songs. Songs to his new-discovered source of happiness, songs to the patient Justice, Beauty, Grandeur, all in One, Whom he had missed in his hasty acceptance of glamour for Resplendent Beauty. Real Justice he had thought to be where only legal form was found. Beauty of earth he had seen decay. Ephemeral power had tottered and fallen. Dante was not the first to be checked at headlong speed and shown the light of truth. There is a Scripture record of a mighty ambition halted in the full force of its misguided career and suddenly diverted to the path of zealous righteousness.[7] Dante would reinterpret his earlier work and show the mystic thought which could be veiled in the same expression as his troubadour carols. And he would write new songs.

Despair would have been his undoing, and he determined not to be mastered. His faith was strong enough to enable him to regard an unavoidable calamity as a disguised blessing. What a heart he had to conceive the idea of song as a preclusion to his losing his all! Songs to accompany his wanderings in strange lands they

[7] *Acts*, IX.

would be; songs woven of dreams of stars caught up in rainbow-tinted clouds; songs sung in a land where he would be forced to know and closely to mingle with "the vicious and ill company in this vale." [8]

The enforced relinquishing of his highest hopes held his judgment taut like the strings of a harp from which he rendered a harmonious conception of the whole of life, life step by step to death, and through death to the final dwelling places of human souls. He was intensely interested in the turmoil from which he had been flung; interested, at last, in a way entirely free from personal ambition. Apart from his political attraction in Florence, he was fascinated by the forces at work in the complex tangle of intrigue from which he had been expelled.

An architect, a mathematician, a scientist, Dante was accustomed as he plied his early occupation to compute the forces and resistances operating in the materials of which were builded arches and bridge-spans. Life was possessed of intangible forces akin to those of inanimate matter; and human life held a potentiality in its mental sphere and in its spiritual realm which he would delight in considering at leisure. Thus with his pen he grappled with ambitions, prej-

[8] *Paradiso,* XVII, 62.

udices, and passions by the same practical method as had been his wont when computing leverage and gravity. He sought causes, points of dependency, and angles of divergence by which two specific powers, acting at the same time, can counterpoise a third. He substituted for the rule, compass, and drawing board, the cross-plot scale of the dogmatic theology of St. Thomas; and, because of the accuracy of this guide to his formative plan, he drew a tremendous apparatus of insight, analysis, and construction: a worthy model of the edifice which Today is building for Eternity.

Dante's character was hard to chisel. Time, faith, and chastening sorrow conformed it to lines of harmonious proportion. A drifting imagination might picture him, at last, as a great solemn crag of granite, rough-hewn, to a countenance silent and majestic against the sunset sky. Time with its biting frosts and tempestuous disturbances has pried both hardening clay and softer rock from close about the silhouette. It stands lonely, instinct with life, facing the far reaches of the boundless sky where is the future for much of the busy turmoil now seething in the blue mists of the valley below.

Lines as of pain furrow the hollow cheeks; but fear has no place in the deep-set eye that seems to pierce the veil of time and look upon

Eternity. Boulders and smaller rocks, broken away, lie recumbent at the base of the massive figure. A golden light, as of romance, glows in the sunset halo behind the rugged features, high-placed enough to reflect another sunrise in the distant East. Strong, swift winds sweep through the changing sky and roar with angry speed down into the valley; but the huge figure stands unmoved, a picture of tragedy endured. Like a storm-swept rock of centuries the great Florentine stands alone.

Dante willingly relinquished no point of all his vast surrender; nor yet did he harbor rebellious thoughts against the Providence of God. His faith, strong with the strength of the promise that inspired it, knew nothing of revolt against Heaven. He stood destitute, looking with unflinching gaze into the terrors of Judgment and Eternity, and beyond the terrors, to Peace.

A spirit of renouncement was Dante's. It was a renouncement different in quality from that of the great St. Francis. The poet was of shorter spiritual stature than the saint: he was more solemn too, if not more serious; but there are many points in common between these two great dreamer-artisans. Each refused to acknowledge a ruler between himself and God; each had deep faith and great power of sacrifice;

each seemed to feel that what came to his hand was given for his administration by God Himself, who knew where to place a trust; each clung with serious determination to that trust and each sacrificed friends, family, and personal energy for its accomplishment.

The saint so joyed in giving that he found himself habitually penniless. And did he not on one notable occasion give away something which was not his to give? St. Francis prodigal of diamonds and dust of wealth ran from his father's house out into God's roofless sunshine to seek out the poor. Dante could not throw away, but he could consistently do without; if he took no voluntary scourge, he bravely bore the heavy buffets of relentless foes. His renouncement was resignation, not discard, and he was not silent in his deprivation: he frowned and grumbled; but his smouldering rebellion was against the stupid action of his fellow men, against rebels of the Universe, as they appeared to him. St. Francis begged by choice for the sake of a smile of the Vision; Dante begged from necessity because of his adherence to political principle. Both were troubadours, both rode to war, and neither had a successor.

St. Francis smiled and emphasized Mercy, Dante frowned and prayed the Hand of Justice to show Its power. His brooding gaze

visioned the forces of Darkness herding souls —blind, thoughtless souls—down bloom-strewn pathways to the gates of Hell. He longed for strength sufficient to end the growing tragedy; therefore he clung fiercely to such power as he could gain. He gripped his fistful of sand so tightly that it all ran through his fingers and left him as empty-handed as was St. Francis who scattered his with open palm upon the beach and ran singing amid flocking souls who sought for song and the echo of laughter. Smiling, the Assisian told them that they were lost and, having no duty other, he would be pleased to find their route for them. The joy that they had craved was suddenly in their hearts. The devil was defeated before he knew he was opposed. Those same people would have thrown stones at the indignant Dante had he tried to silence their clamor.

The great, solemn philosopher lacked the humor of St. Francis. He learned truths by experience; the saint was shown them in vision. He learned in the hardest of ways that nothing of earth is so dependable that it is not itself dependent upon an immaterial Being which no human force can compel. He craved justice, craved it with such zeal that he searched the world to find it; failing here he dug into the bed-rock of adversity to look into Hell

itself and through Hell into Heaven. It was no cursory glance that he gave to those mysterious realms beyond; for his was not a coward soul; he craved truth. With set teeth he faced the horrid all of Hate's domain; and with reverent awe he gazed into the very face of Love.

Judging from the evidence of Dante's enormous accomplishment, we pronounce him a busy man, frugal of time; from the delicacy of his sonnets to Beatrice and his repeated reference to the Virgin of virgins, we think his mind was clean, and capable of a reverence as deep as his hatred. He disdained the bow which courtesy demanded for masked officials of either Church or State; but his soul knelt in profound veneration before honor, purity and truth. He lauded restraint and we feel that his life was no contradiction to his principles.

In Great Inspirers we read: "Petrarch loves to dilate on the beautiful angelic mouth . . . of Laura; Ariosto revels in word painting of . . . the red lips of his mistress; while Tasso depicts the lovely mouth of Lanora . . . There is nothing of this in Dante. He gives us an image of Beatrice's personal graces by telling us of the impression she produced on him. He portrays the beauty of her soul." [9] Elsewhere in the same volume we find: "Beatrice not only

[9] *Great Inspirers*, p. 142.

mitigated the bitterness of his long cruel exile, but she gave him strength to complete the colossal monument which he had vowed to erect in her honor. Her sweet small voice, what Chateaubriand would call her visible melody, taught him the significance of the cross and the purifying value of suffering. She taught him also how to transmute the seeming tragedy of life into immortal song and at the end of his long quest for peace, she had him cheerfully sing with the blessed in Paradise

And His will is our peace." [10]

These quotations are from the pen of Dr. J. A. Zahm, C.S.C., profound Dante scholar, who knew the illustrious Florentine almost as one still living with whom he could hold intimate converse.

It is gratifying to have from such a reliable source the statement that the gentle, gracious Beatrice Portinare who was the inspirer of Dante's beautiful love sonnets also "taught" their author the "significance of the cross and the purifying value of suffering."

The strength of Beatrice is doubtless the secret of the great poet's writing of unspoiled, chivalric love, songs that dared to be sung before the clear-eyed stars, such songs that might

[10] *Great Inspirers*, p. 168.

cause a blush of vanity but never a flush of shame. Vulgar commentators have pronounced Beatrice a dream-creation, else (so it seems to them) she would have provoked a different style of address. White heat is more intense than red heat, and clean love is more enduring and deeper than sensual affection. Is it that Love, beautiful, wide-eyed, generous Love, has so often fallen among robbers that the great virtue itself is looked upon with suspicion? Alighieri's soul was capable of sympathy with all that is grand and majestic in the world; his was a soul strong enough to roll away the stone that blocks the vision of Eternity and sensitive enough to feel the wonders and grasp the beauty and sweetness of the World Beyond. His spirit was not one that could revel in gross pleasures. Sacrilege draws near when one of questioning attitude, to whom intensity of nature is synonymous with evil, offers his clumsy attempt at character-interpretation of any soul of fine feeling.

The Divine Comedy must be pronounced the consistent fruit of a disciplined mind even though one consider nothing but the mechanical form of the poem. The accommodation of language to any definite repeated pattern of poetic structure is a difficult task, one that requires a mind free from the domination of

changing mood; for with each new humor comes a tendency to vary the mode of expression. Wordsworth, who often preferred the sonnet form, wrote of it nevertheless as a "scanty plot of ground" and a "prison into which we doom ourselves." [11] Can a modern juggler with the unrhymed phrases in free verse be imagined confining his expression to a requirement wherein he would follow a continuous subject through three parts of thirty-three cantos each, using the triple rhyme throughout? Such was the task Dante set himself in the *Commedia.* The numbers three and thirty-three were not chosen at random by the author. Every measured fibre of the great epic pulses with spiritual life, theological thought. It is all a closely knit prayer of praise of God's Justice. Every line is consecrated to the Holy Trinity; each division of the trilogy holds as many cantos as there were years in Our Blessed Redeemer's life upon earth. Yet Boccaccio says that Dante was licentious, and, if we may adapt Mark Antony, Boccaccio "is an honorable man."

This biographer, a journalist before his time, knew the literary public well; he sensed that it was not averse to having its literature seasoned with a trifle of ill-flavor. His was too kindly a

[11] *Sonnet on the Sonnet.*

temperament to deny his readers the joyous pain that occasions a concerned whisper. Boccaccio would gratify the popular taste; he would please the gossiping ear, and thus did he forfeit the title of biographer. He made much of The Lady of the Window, Dante's figure for philosophy in the *Convito,* but he was not in a position to know the truth concerning Dante's private life, since he was only eight years old when the poet died and, according to Moore, *La Vita* was written full half a century later.

In the *Convito* there is specific definition of the Lady of the Window:

> And as it sometimes happens that a man goes seeking silver, and beyond his expectation finds gold . . . I came to the conclusion that Philosophy, who was the Lady of these authors, this knowledge, and these books, was a supreme thing. And I imagined her as having the features of a gentle lady. And after this imagination I began to go there where she displayed herself truly, that is to say, to the school of the religious, and to the disputations of the philosophers. . . I began to feel so much of her sweetness that the love of her chased away and destroyed every thought.

In *Convito,* Book III, he defines his use of the word love as "that which arises in the noblest natures, *viz.* the love of truth, and of virtue, and will exclude any false opinion about me, by which it might be suspected that my

love is associated with the pleasures of sense." He also explains in a very plausible way how philosophy may temporarily supplant religion in an earnest inquiring soul. In Book IV we find:

> As a pilgrim, who goes along a road on which he never was before, thinks every house he sees afar off to be his inn, and not finding it so, directs his trust to the next, and thus from house to house till he comes to the inn, so our soul, at once, on entering the new and untravelled road of this life, turns her eyes to the goal of her supreme good, and therefore whatever thing she sees which seems to have in it some good, she believes to be that.

Dante pictures in the following manner, one nearing death:

> Like the good merchant, who when he draws near his port, examines his getting and says: Had I not passed along this way, I should not have this treasure, nor have gained that which I may enjoy in my city to which I am drawing near; and therefore he blesses the way which he has come.

It is not a memory eaten with remorse that thus reasons.

Boccaccio, however, calls upon a nephew of Alighieri who lived in Florence while the exile was in distant parts, for certain damaging evidence against Dante, "to induce belief in the remainder" of his narrative. Few items, other than a memory of his distinguished uncle, seem

to be recorded of this far-seeing kinsman. There have been pigmy relatives who, jealous at the dizzy heights achieved by some noble ancestor, have set themselves to belittle his personal reputation. Achievement by one member of a family sometimes serves as a prod of shame to another of the same blood who has not so attained.

If some vengeful worshipper of the memory of Dante should have asserted fifty years after the death of Boccaccio, or later, that the author of *La Vita di Dante* had read his own character into the events of Dante's life, who would prove it false?

Could it possibly have been during the lifetime of the author of the *Decameron* that there grew, in a deep well in the heart of a quiet wood, a memory-waterlily reputed to be large and beautiful beyond compare? 'Tis said that one who heard of this pursed his red, heavy lips, lifted one brow and betook himself to the hidden spot of the spring. Kneeling, he bent low to look into the dark, moss-bordered mirror. And, behold, there looked up at him a heavy bloated countenance with eyes asquint and one brow lifted. Taking a pebble he dropped it contemptuously, so the legend goes, into the upturned, ugly face which broke into a thousand happy little waves that clapped their

hands for joy and slipped quietly away to a sleep again in comfort beneath the protecting mantle of the tranquil lily.

But this is a digression. To what purpose is a fairy story tucked away in a solemn commentary on a profound philosopher? Let Reason preside, lest lightness be intruded here.

Giovanni Villani, an acquaintance and neighbor of Dante, is cited by Wicksteed as a chronicler "valuable to historians as he is delightful to the general reader" and further, "when dealing with his own times and with events immediately connected with Florence, he is a trustworthy witness."

Let us then cast aside our conclusions based upon circumstantial evidence, with that of Boccaccio, and find what the old reliable chronicle tells us. In Book IX of the *Croniche Fiorentine* of Villani, translated by Rose Selfe, we have: "In the said year 1321, in the month of July, Dante Alighieri of Florence died in the city of Ravenna . . . and in Ravenna before the door of the chief church, he was buried with great honor in the garb of a poet and of a great philosopher . . . This Dante, a citizen of an ancient and honorable family in Florence . . . because of his knowledge, was somewhat haughty and reserved and disdainful after the fashion of a philosopher, careless of graces and

not easy in his converse with laymen; but because of the lofty virtues and worth of so great a citizen, it seems fitting to confer lasting memory upon him in this our chronicle although his noble works, left to us in writing, are the true testimony of him and are an honorable report to our city."

Having traversed a circle we are, then, referred back again to the works of the man for a "true testimony." We shall judge him by the letters whose title to authenticity is the least disputed, by his *Convito* and by the *Divina Commedia.*

Epistola VI, dated March 31, 1311, bears the following remarkable heading: "Dante Alighieri, a Florentine undeservedly in exile, to the most iniquitous Florentines within the city." Was this salutation a vain expression of unconquerable hauteur in a broken politician? Shall it be regarded as the venom of an infuriated mind spat in the direction of hated victors? May it not be a statement of fact from one who had renounced all desire for such possession as was held in the custody of the officials addressed and who did not set his life "at a pin's fee"? [12] The letter which follows seems to be an appeal for right conduct from one apart, asking noth-

[12] *Hamlet,* I, IV.

ing for himself, demanding nothing, but making a protest for justice, that peace might follow under its influence. He directs attention to "the thought of the judgment of the stern Judge" as a corrective for his former neighbors "who transgress every law of God and man, whom the insatiable greed of avarice has urged . . . into every crime."

In paragraph 2 the great contemplative gives utterance to a statement worthy of an ecclesiastic: "No condition of the sinner is more terrible than that of him who, shamelessly and without fear of God, does whatever he lists." Does this sound like a senseless spiteful utterance or is Dante attempting the work of an apostle in behalf of those who hate him? The most simple interpretation of the statement is to accept it as the philosophy of a man who was a stranger to neither comfort nor penury, who for a brief time had drunk deep of glory, and who at the hands of those addressed had learned "how salt doth taste another's bread, and how hard a path to descend and mount another's stair." He had learned the pain and the worth of restrained desire. No charm of earth now held his heart; he longed for nothing within the power of the world to bestow. Had it been otherwise he would have searched for consola-

tion in human sources. Under accusation only clear consciences seek comfort in the penetrating gaze of God.

In April 1311 Dante Alighieri, "a Florentine undeservedly in exile" wrote another letter which has been preserved for us. In it he pledges devotion to "Lord Henry, by Divine Providence King of the Romans" and "with all Tuscans everywhere who desire peace" he offers "a kiss on the ground before his feet." Then follow eight lengthy paragraphs in which the dangers to the empire are emphasized as dangers existing because of political corruption in his native city. The climactic statement of the letter is a denunciation of self-worship: "Verily she (Florence) resists the ordinance of God worshipping the idol of her own will, when spurning her rightful king she is not ashamed, mad as she is, to barter rights not her own with a king not her own."

Dante needed no deliberate determination to set himself against the current of admiration for superficial success. His was a deep nature, which could not be mastered by a power that he held in slight regard. The prod in his own heart from the thrust of tyranny caused his thoughts to revert constantly to inequity in general. He had been banished on a slanderous charge that he could not prove false. This might

have been the undoing of a spirit given to morbid brooding; but in a Christian of discerning mind bitter thoughts drift to the background of the picture and throw divine justice into relief. It is amid the stress of human conflict that the spirit of renouncement is generated in the souls of Saints; but not every man prefers self mastery to the conquering of other wills. Honor, in renouncing honors, is won in such circumstances by only souls of strength and of patience; for a living resentment returns unbidden and intrudes itself repeatedly as a decisive force for ill.

The discerning companion, Giotto, must have foreseen great possibilities in the future of the young Alighieri, since he included his portrait in the celebrated group on the altar wall of the Palace of the Podesta. No other painting of Dante is known to have been made during his lifetime.

Charles Eliot Norton has read the following into that picture: "The face is one of the most pathetic upon which human eyes ever looked, for it exhibits in its expression the conflict between the strong nature of the man and the hard dealings of fortune—between the idea of his life and its practical experience. Strength is the most striking attribute of the countenance, displayed alike in the broad forehead, the mas-

culine nose, the firm lips, the heavy jaw and the wide chin. And this strength is enforced by the strength of the lines of expression. The look is grave and stern almost to grimness; there is a scornful lift to the eyebrow, and a contraction of the forehead as from painful thought; but obscured under this look, yet not lost are the marks of tenderness, refinement and self-mastery, which . . . give . . . dignity. . . . It is the image of a strong fortress of a strong soul built upon a conscience and an impregnable will . . . standing firm and unshaken . . . until the warfare was at an end."

Professor Norton, devoted and distinguished Dante scholar that he was, carried in his sagacious mind a sympathetic interpretation of the man, which years of deep study gave him. The painting, done before Dante had made his greatest struggles, holds but a hint of the future possibilities in the mature character. He was about twenty when he posed for it. Therefore it is not improbable that the picture would have carried a lesser message to the critic if there had not rested in the scholar's subconscious mind a deep respect for that "self mastery" and that "impregnable will" which his acquaintance with the poet's life had discovered. Perhaps for him, there stood behind the picture such a scene as that in the *Inferno* where St. Lucy reminds

Beatrice that Dante's love for her was of such exalted type that "for thee he left the vulgar crowd." [13] Perhaps he was remembering Dante's own expression when Forese, in Purgatory, asked him when he would come again:

> "I know not," answered I him, "how long I may live, yet my return will not be so soon but that I be not before with my desire at the bank:
>
> for the place where I was put to live is day by day more stripped of good, and seems doomed to woeful ruin." [14]

The soul in which that sentence was formulated was conscious of his own faithfulness to a long trust; and there are few restraints that lie heavier upon the spirit than a constant alertness for duty's call. In that sincere sigh of loneliness for Eternity, renouncement of earth in Dante was perfect; it touched the sublime.

[13] *Inferno*, II, 105. [14] *Purgatorio*, XXIV, 76.

CHAPTER III

DANTE'S CAST OF CHARACTERS

BY THE spirit of renouncement Dante graded all of the characters in the *Commedia* to the places of punishment and reward of his creation. The highest renouncement made by a soul when on earth has merited Dante's highest Heaven. The greatest absence of restraint in a pilgrim soul has plunged him in Hell's deepest abyss. Only with this interpretation can the reader clear away the confusion of mind which results from finding the same type of virtue rewarded at different heights of Heaven; and the same type of sin punished at different depths of Hell. Thieves, for example, are found in Circle Four and in Circle Eight; murderers are in Circle Seven and in Circle Nine. According as there is some remnant of self-renouncement evident in the soul, or none whatever, Dante grades it for eternal life. We shall consider, in the chapter following, the technical balance by which Dante arrived at the fine distinctions in the grading of his characters. At present we shall but endeavor to destroy the

general impression that the ingenious author of the *Inferno* invented the details of this place of torment as a grotesque means of self satisfaction.

"When control of the positive experiences of his own life and that of certain others was forced out of his power," men observe, "did he not draw the curtain on actuality and stage things as he would have them?"

If one contemplate the stern features and the brooding gaze of the great Florentine, and imagine his thoughts to be centered upon the immediate past and with characters of his immediate surroundings, it is easy to conclude that vengeance prompted his mood. Grim and bitter determination could find rest behind the deep set gaze of Dante. Thus tradition pictures that lonely exile toasting mental effigies of his foes as a pleasing diversion. Yet careful study reveals the fact that few of the characters of the *Inferno* had touched the life of Dante and that among that number some were held in kindly memory by the poet. He calls giants and other fictitious characters to judgment; and he omits the names of many who intimately affected his destiny. No, Dante's mind was greater than most critics seem to believe; his judgment turned on principle and the deciding factor was the presence or absence of the spirit

of renouncement. Being a man of genius he created a wide diversity of punishments to fit his moods and his particular regard for the individual whom he called to his judgment. His stage properties were fire and ice, the wind, a variety of adhesive liquids differing in degree as objects of disgust; monsters and imps he called to his service.

It is, perhaps, worthy of serious consideration whether the interpretation of the entire *Divina Commedia* might have been different in the light of a more genial countenance. There is little of personal magnetism in an emaciated form, a piercing eye, and a resolute mouth. The reputation of an enemy with that type of features is easily ruined. The motive of such a man's action is easily misjudged. Dante has been wronged by even his admirers.

It is an insult to the memory of the man, who composed the highest story of human love that ever moved the hearts of men, to speak of him as an ogre. It is unfair to picture him as a brooding monster who knew a wicked glee in imagining details of lingering sufferings that he dared not inflict. Dante's readers have thoughtlessly repeated the thougthless statements of others; and yet they have kept him in their minds as the "universal poet," worthy the homage of students. In their hearts these people

of refined temper know that the author never looked at the stars, a bird of plumage or of song, a fragile flower or the tumbling ocean, without seeing, behind the external manifestation, the God of power. Dante had just four things to say in the great Italian Epic. They are the result of deep thought, and earnest conviction:

> God is just, powerful, truthful and eternal;
> God has made the Hell and heaven which His word promises to the deserving;
> God exempts no person from the law because of position, social or ecclesiastic;
> God has made Heaven higher than Hell is low.

There is his message for all; and he meant it for all, since he employed the "vulgar tongue" for its expression. That Dante had a mission and a message for the world is attested by the fact that, though the world has abused him, it has used him through the centuries.

To the end of carrying conviction to his readers, Dante staged his philosophic story with characters from history, from the myths, or from the troublous time of his age. His literary predecessors had personified passions and graces in the creation of the mystery play. That plan had succeeded well, but after the novelty had worn away, there was a sameness, and a flavor of fiction about it which was distasteful to this

practical man. There were, he felt, a sufficient number of well-known characters to act his parts for him—characters that were generally conceded to have been ruled by some predominant passions: cowardice, incontinence, violence, or fraud in some form.

Dante would administer, in the Hell of his design, punishments that would seem meet for a typical lack of renouncement for the sake of the law of God: a typical resistance to renouncement for the purpose of earthly success. He would make his punishments and awards sufficiently realistic to remain in the minds of readers in an insistent way; for, in the face of facts, faith without fear seemed impotent toward virtue; belief did not induce right conduct. It was a hypothetic quality of only a mind at rest; but in action, in daily life, even the teachers of doctrine and the interpreters of dogma acted as though earthly life held, in itself, a worth of higher value than did the future.

Having weighed sin, and arranged corruption according to the specific gravity of its malice, Dante searched the world of reality and of fiction for characters to fill the parts designed. Cowardice of will, typified by the ever-neutral, he could give to the foolish angels who hid their eyes with their wings during the tu-

mult of war in Heaven. They had thought to ally themselves with the Victor when peace would be again restored; but they were unworthy of Heaven, having no spirit of renouncement, and undeserving of torment. The epic was not to be written for the angels, however, and the author must find at least one human example to fill the part.

This was more difficult; it was not easy to discover a character well known to his readers, one who, without strength of decision, had achieved fame. Vacillating characters he would find in plenty, men who changed their minds with every new adviser; but a public man who utterly refused to make decision was rare. Then he remembered Celestine V, the Pope who had been called from the cloister cave of meditation at the age of eighty. Celestine was a saintly man; he knew how to combat the unseen forces in the battle of life. But, when he found himself appointed Supreme Judge in matters temporal and spiritual throughout the Christian world, he was bewildered. He was sorely perplexed over the political situation in France and England. He was a Franciscan; he would make happiness between factions. But each side persisted in insisting upon its indisputable right to the whole of everything in question, and the confused Pontiff resigned his

sacred office. Dante undoubtedly knew that humility impelled the recluse to abdicate the Papal throne; but he was not familiar with that type of humility and he made no pretentions to understand it. Commentators agree that it is either the Holy Father or the Rich Young Man of the Gospel [1] whom we find with the Trimmers in the vestibule of Hell:

> After I had recognized some among them, I
> (saw and knew) the shadow of him who
> from cowardice made the great refusal.[2]

But it is unfair to accuse Dante of venting a personal grievance in his placing of either character in such evil company. No one could have a personal grievance with the kindly old hermit. He is adjudged to have been well practised in the lore of Heaven, and simply unfitted for the problems of political science.

The successor of Pope Celestine V seems to have been of an opposite type of character. He was a man of the world, worldly; one so wily, in the ways of men, as to grace poorly the Chair of St. Peter who left all to follow Christ. Pope Boniface VIII was of such a nature as to fill one, on Dante's quest, with content. Well authenticated biographies leave little doubt as to his ability to play the rôle of evil counsellor

[1] *St. Matthew*, XIX, 22. [2] *Inferno*, III, 58.

for the sake of personal gain. Guido, a penitent schemer, confesses his own lapse into sin in such wise as to involve Boniface. He appears in Circle VIII of the *Inferno* bearing witness against the Pontiff. The Pope would seem to have promised the penitent absolution from the guilt of new evil counsel, provided Guido would instruct him in a plan to conquer the city of Penestrino:

> Let not thy heart
> misdoubt; even now I do absolve thee, and
> do thou teach me so to act, that I may cast
> Penestrino to the ground.
>
> Heaven I can shut and open, as thou knowest;
> for two are the keys that my predecessor held
> not dear . . .[3]
>
> St. Francis afterwards, when I was dead,
> came for me; but one of the Black Cherubim said to him: "Do not take him; wrong
> me not!" [4]

Thus does the old warrior who advised treachery as the means of gaining the city incriminate

> . . . the Great Priest, may evil befall him!
> who brought me back to my first sins;[5]

Pope Boniface VIII was still living when the vision was supposed to have been witnessed,

[3] *Inferno*, XXVII, 100.
[4] *Ibid.*, XXVII, 112.
[5] *Ibid.*, XXVII, 70.

but a man of Dante's genius was not to be thwarted in his choice of a good character by the trifling matter of a soul's inability to appear. He simply puts into the mouth of Pope Nicholas III, a simonist in Circle VIII, a prophecy concerning the later arrival of both Pope Boniface VIII and Pope Clement V. The pontificate of Pope Nicholas III occupied the interval between Dante's twelfth and twentieth year. Of him unprejudiced authority says "Apart from nepotism, he was a man of unblemished character." [6] Dante enlarges the definition of technical simony to include the nepotist, it would appear, and reads a compelling sermon to that condemned Pope on the virtue of poverty:

> Ah! now
> tell me how much treasure
>
> Our Lord required of St. Peter, before he put the keys into his keeping? surely he demanded nought but "Follow me!" . . .
>
> And were it not that reverence for the Great Keys thou heldest in the glad life yet hinders me,
>
> I should use still heavier words: . . .
> Ye have made a god of gold and silver;
> and wherein do you differ from the idolator
> save that he worships one and ye a hundred.[7]

[6] *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. XI, p. 57.
[7] *Inferno*, XIX, 89.

And Dante does hold a "reverence for the Great Keys" as is evinced by his condemnation of the enemies who laid sacrilegious hands on Pope Boniface VIII. Such is the faith of Alighieri, that a personal affront to the Head of Christ's Church is a re-enactment of the dread Good Friday Crime:

> A second time I see him mocked; I see the vinegar and the gall renewed, and him slain between living thieves.
>
> I see the new Pilot so cruel, that this sateth him not, but lawlessly he bears his greedy sails into the temple.[8]

If Dante were a melancholy miser of grievances would he not have rejoiced at the fate of his hated Boniface? He took pains to omit no detail of the intense suffering in the heated cavities wherein the wicked rebels must suffer, heads downward for eternity:

> From the mouth of each cavern emerged a sinner's feet,
> and legs up to the calf; the rest remained within,
>
> The soles of all were both on fire; wherefore the joints quivered so strongly, that they would have snapped in pieces withes and grass-ropes.[9]

This dreadful picture of the persecutors of Boniface seems inconsistent with the resentment avowed against him. It is inconsistent if

[8] *Purgatorio*, XX, 88. [9] *Inferno*, XIX, 22.

we consider the author's purpose to be the gratification of a morbid hatred of a fictitious victim. But Dante was not inconsistent. He was relating a terrible truth, as he saw it, in the punishments which he pictured in Hell. Both Boniface and his persecutors had failed in renouncement and though his scenes are vivid and realistic, they are formed with no exultation of impish glee at the pain inflicted. Rather might we say that the author of the letters of protest, "To the most iniquitous . . . Florentines" was attempting, again, to direct the attention of a stubborn people to "The thought of the judgment of the Stern Judge." [10]

The highest ecclesiastics are shown to be capable of earning low stations in eternity. This, after all, was not a new doctrine in the fourteenth century, nor is it yet denied by those who believe in eternity. Judas was one of the Chosen Twelve. This fact in Dante's judgment rather added to the grievous nature of his crime. The station of the traitor Apostle in the lowest depth of Hell testifies Dante's regard for those ingrates who use God's highest gifts to harm Him by their greed.

Kingly power, the prestige of queens, the beauty of idols of the court, genius of the mind, and physical strength of giants are

[10] *Epistola,* VI.

shown to be less than a feather's weight as influence in the scale of justice wherein are weighed the sins on the souls of men by this single standard of judgment: God is just, and He must be perfectly fair in His allotments of award; He is powerful, and the creatures of His hand may not defy Him with discretion; He is truthful, and the Hell of His creation is a place where "there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth"; [11] He is eternal, and, while He lives, His promises are faithfully fulfilled. Criminals of the various centuries are judged by the same unvarying law. "Their strong ones, and their people and their high and glorious ones shall go down into it." [12]

Note how many of the characters of the *Divine Comedy* are total strangers to Dante. Semiramis, the Babylonian Queen; Dido, Queen of Carthage; Helen of Troy and the infamous Cleopatra suffer in the Circle of Carnality. There, too, we find Paris of Troy and the classical hero, Achilles. Paolo and Francesca were distantly connected with the nobleman who sheltered Dante in exile.

The repulsive figure, Ciacco [pig] with whom we converse in the Circle of Gluttony is of the poet's own creation. He refers us to further depths for the citizens of interest to Dante.

[11] *St. Matthew*, 8, 12. [12] *Isaias*, 5, 14.

The pilgrim's expectation of finding certain men of his acquaintance here is suggestive of two things: He considered them to be guilty of gluttony, but he had yet another truth to teach: each soul gravitates to the circle of its deepest offense. Gluttony can be a great sin; but few natures who would so fail in renouncement as to yield mortally to gratification of the sense of taste would hold their other senses in curb.

Among the characters for whom Dante inquires is Farinata, a man who seems to hold the author's kindly regard; for though of opposed political conviction, the old warrior is shown to possess traits of bravery and patriotism that no heart of Dante's temper could disregard. Yet we meet him in the Circle of Heretics entombed in a sepulchre "so glowing hot, that iron more hot no craft requires." [13] Mosca [14] suffers with the sowers of discord in the second deepest Circle of Hell. Tegghiaio [15] and Rusticucci are encountered in the Circle with Brunetto [16] and others whom the philosopher deems guilty of violence against God.

Brunetto had written two books, the *Libre dou Tresor* and the *Tesoretto,* an allegorical poem in Italian, which deeply influenced Dante.

[13] *Inferno,* IX, 119.
[14] *Ibid.,* XXVIII, 103.
[15] *Ibid.,* XVI, 28–45.
[16] *Ibid.,* XV, 30.

He admired its literary worth, took suggestion from its allegory, and acknowledged his debt as to a teacher.

> . . . you taught me how man makes himself eternal;
> and whilst I live, beseems my tongue should
> show what gratitude I have for it.[17]

He is careful in this instance to leave no room for surmise as to his personal feeling toward the character of his choice. He is grateful to Brunetto, and he admires the teaching of his "maestro," whether as a preceptor or as an author-friend. This man knew the intimate history of Dante; for he makes reference to Beatrice as to an inspirer:

> . . . If you follow thy star, thou
> canst not fail of glorious haven, if I discerned
> rightly in thy fair life.[18]

His knowledge of Dante is reflexive in its meaning: Dante knew enough of the life of Latini to place him, regretfully, among the sinners of Sodom, and the usurers of Cahors. There are many in this Circle, and it is evident that Dante considered failure to renounce unlawful physical pleasures a not-uncommon failing among the cultured in manner and educated in mind.

> . . . It is good to know of some; of
> the rest it will be laudable that we keep silence,
> as the time would be too short for so much talk.

[17] *Inferno*, XV, 85. [18] *Ibid.*, XV, 55.

> In brief know that all were clerks, and great scholars, and of great renown; by one same crime on earth defiled.[19]

The only other poets recognized in the *Inferno* are Virgil, Dante's guide; Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan, in the Circle of the Heathen. There is no mock humility about our author; he recognizes his own power as truly as he knows theirs. They do homage to the genius of the Christian poet.

> After they had talked a space together, they turned to me with sign of salutation; and my Master smiled thereat.
>
> And greatly more besides they honored me; for they made me of their number, so that I was a sixth among such intelligences.[20]

And the great minds walked on together, speaking of things which he deems quite too deep for the mentality of any of his readers:

> Thus we went onwards to the light, speaking things which it is well to pass in silence, as it was well to speak there where I was.[21]

Jason, the half mythical character of Greek legend, and Vendico Caccianimico, the Bolognese who was reputed to have been an aid to his sister's seducer, are the only characters

[19] *Inferno,* XV, 103.
[20] *Ibid.,* IV, 97.
[21] *Ibid.,* IV, 103.

named for division one of Circle VIII. As Dante observed the scourged souls fleeing before horned demons, he recognized Venedico, and challenged his presence.

> And he to me, "Unwillingly I tell it; but thy clear speech—compels me.
>
> It was I who led the fair Ghisola [his sister] to do the Marquis' will, however the unseemly tale may sound.
>
> . . . and if
> thou desirest assurance . . . thereof,
> recall to thy memory our avaricious heart." [22]

The author derives his flatterers, one from his personal acquaintance, Allessio de Interminei, and the other, Thaïs, from Cicero's *Amicitia*. Little seems to be known about Allessio, save that he was an ambitious politician.

The diviners are insignificant in themselves and are known only through their unlawful practice as tools of noted men. Their punishment is unique in that they must look backward, physically, throughout eternity; for their offence has been in looking too far forward mentally during life on earth.

In the *Paradiso,* we again meet statement of the impropriety of unrestrained curiosity in a creature. The occasion is that of Dante's questioning St. Peter Damian as to why he had been appointed to welcome the pilgrims to the Circle

[22] *Inferno,* XVIII, 52.

of the Contemplative. He is advised that an answer half understood is of less value than none. Many things cannot be understood by the human mind, without the transcendent light of Heaven's illumination:

> because so far within the abyss of the eternal
> lieth the thing thou askest, that from
> all created vision it is cut off.
>
> The mind which shineth here, on earth doth
> smoke, and therefore think how it should have
> power there below, which it hath not even
> though Heaven take it to itself.[23]

In the Circle of Barrators, Dante had an extraordinary opportunity to vent personal feeling: to dip in filthy pitch the political enemies, whom he believed to have sold positions of merit. The punishments here are designed with great care. The sinners labor about in a depth of secret political corruption; and they who forced others, unjustly, to action against their will, are commanded by horrid demons for all eternity. Here the vindictive author might gloat in gruesome joy; but we search here in vain for the name of one of the political foes who caused Alighieri's exile.

Dante's ill feeling against Annas and Caiaphas is only the aversion which every Christian must know for those enemies of Christ. Devoid of renouncement, craving power and lux-

[23] *Paradiso*, XXI, 94.

ury, under pretext of virtue they devised to condemn the meek Lord of charity to torture and to death. The names of the other hypocrites are not revealed to us.

The Circle of Thieves harbors Vanni Fucci, who "robbed the sacristy of its goodly furniture." [24] Dante tells Virgil of this man that he "saw him once a man of rage and blood"; [25] but the reader is given no further clue to his identity. Cacus we recognize from the legend as the monster cattle thief of the mountain side:

> whence his crooked actions ceased beneath the club of Hercules, who gave him perhaps a hundred blows with it; and he felt not the first ten.[26]

There are five others of whom little seems to be known. It is unlikely that they figured in any notable way in Dante's life. His suffering was not occasioned by petty thieves but by political despoilers. He takes the opportunity here for ironic congratulation of the officials of his native city:

> thy name through Hell expands itself! [27]

The characters in the Circle of Discord are chosen chiefly from among old warriors who are reputed as lovers of battle for its own sake. Spirits are summoned from the battle fields of

[24] *Inferno*, XXIV, 137.
[25] *Ibid.*, XXIV, 129.
[26] *Ibid.*, XXV, 31.
[27] *Ibid.*, XXVI, 3.

old Roman wars, and Punic wars hundreds of years before the Christian era. Mohammed here claims little courtesy from the pen of a Christian. No one will deny that he was a sower of discord; though a less thorough author might have omitted his name. Fra Dolcino was a fomenter of religious strife during Dante's time. He was opposed by Pope Clement V whom we have met in the Circle of Simonists. Dante had an eye to discipline; if a Pope failed seriously, condemn his conduct. But no member of the Church is thereby justified in becoming an instrument in the breaking of a sect from the Church itself.

Mosca was a stirrer of civil strife. He was the adviser of the Amidei adherents in the consultation over Buodelmonte's broken troth. Villani, the Chronicler, tells us that "Mosca de Lamberti said the evil word; 'Thing done hath an end'; to wit that he should be slain; and so it was done."[28] This was the beginning of the old civil strife between the Guelf and Ghibelline factions in Florence. Bertran de Born who walks carrying his head, swinging by its hair like a lantern, died half a century before Dante was born; he had been active in feudal warfare. Thus we have a variety of trouble makers, people of note, and men who become

[28] Villani, V, 38.

the evil position given them in Hell. Geri de Bello is a cousin of Dante. The author claims kindred in the realm of sorrow as well as in Paradise. Cacciaguida, a distant grandsire, greets him in Heaven, among the courageous, here kinship is acknowledged with a cousin among the sowers of discord for personal temporal gain.

Capocchio,[29] in company of Falsifiers, testifies that he was guilty of deceiving Griffolino of Arezzo; but he admits that he was not condemned to such depth of misery because of that crime. He had also tampered with the metals of the coin. The crime for which he was burned to death bore no proportion to the guilt of the secret sin of which none knew but God. Commentators think he was one of Dante's friends. Master Adam of Brescia,[30] also, was a counterfeiter; Gianni Schicchi, an actor, impersonated a dead man and thus dictated a will whereby not only did the man's son profit but he himself benefited. Sinon [31] is the Greek boy whom all Latin students have met. It was he who pretended to be a traitor to his own cause, and thus induced the trusting Trojans to admit the Wooden Horse full of Greek warriors within the walls of their city.

[29] *Inferno,* XXIX, 109 *et seq.* [31] *Ibid.,* XXX, 98.
[30] *Ibid.,* XXX, 103.

Potiphar's wife is a Scriptural character who caused the unjust imprisonment of a servant by her false testimony. We have here deceit for the sake of coin, for patriotic motives and for revenge. The parts are filled by characters who lived in Dante's time and by those who lived before the time of Christ. None of them are enemies of the author.

The giants need no comment. They merely represent great physical power and seem to be introduced to show that even they might not dare to transgress the law without having to pay retribution. Dante may have been guided by the Scriptural text: "Behold the giants groan under the waters." [32]

The last class of crime to appear before Dante's tribunal is Treacherous Fraud. These sinners are punished in a series of Circles of darkness and misery, frozen in the depth of the Universe. The four Circles are named for Cain, Antenor, Ptolomæus, and Judas: four splendid examples of treachery of different types. Traitors to kindred are punished in Caina; traitors to town and country, in the Antenora; traitors to friends and guests, in the Tolomea, and traitors to lords and benefactors, in the Judecca.

Critics have made much of the attitude of

[32] *Job, 26, 5.*

detestation which Dante assumes toward Bocca; and when one reads that Bocca degli Abbati was entangled in the Guelph and Ghibelline turmoil, it does look as though at last Dante is found exercising personal vengeance upon a personal enemy. Bocca enlisted on the Guelph side and, at a critical moment, in the battle of Montaperti, cut off the hand of the Guelph standard bearer. Dante took an active part in the bloody Guelph and Ghibelline dispute; but our author is cleared of the charge when we discover that the battle of Montaperti was fought five years before Dante was born.

The other treacherous souls are many, and some of them are well known to history; but there seems to be no reason for Dante to dislike their memory any more than should the rest of mankind. The author makes no allowance for the possible patriotic motive which some students attribute to the treachery of Brutus. He, Cassius, and Judas each occupy one of the enormous mouths of Lucifer in the uttermost depths of the frozen pit.

And now we have reviewed the whole dreadful company, and found villains of honored credentials for the parts allotted them. We have tried to show, as briefly as we might, by repeated illustration, that there was something much larger and more momentous in Dante's

project, the *Inferno,* than is generally conceded. It seems conclusive that Alighieri with an impartial mind assumed the sacred office of judge and condemned all human acts which were devoid of self renouncement.

CHAPTER IV

DANTE'S SCALE OF JUSTICE

THE SPIRIT of renouncement was the pivot upon which Dante weighed the gravity of an offense or the value of a worthy deed. He had suffered much from his fellowmen; he had observed a great deal in his lonely exile and he seems to have recognized a common quality in all sin and a common charm in all virtue. He believed that every evil thing can be expressed in terms of selfishness and that all good is renounced in one form or another.

It is quite probable that, in his ascertaining of moral values Dante did not consciously visualize a material scale upon which deeds might be compared and tested, watched and weighed. The direct grasp of ideas enabled him to sense each value directly, "Weighing the one against the other." [1] Yet it may simplify our consideration of this subject if we employ the familiar see-saw illustration which some teachers of ethics use to show how the same act is more

[1] *Paradiso*, XXI, 23.

powerful for good or evil according as its point of vantage is distant from the fulcrum of the lever. It is an easy step of reasoning from this picture to the compound-lever scale, according to the laws of which a scale-of-justice can be made. Let it be assumed to differ from the material scale in that it is weightless, and that it is suspended at mid-point by a ray of light as from the heart of God: "From that point doth hang heaven and all nature." [2] This we shall call Dante's Justice Scale. Marked in vivid, unmistakable lines, on the arm to the right of the point of suspension, let us imagine eleven equal divisions between each of which rests a letter. The word which the letters spell is selfishness. When an act is performed entirely for self, with utter disregard for God or fellowman, be the matter grave or light, its point of suspension is above the last *s* of the word thus:

As there is less of selfishness in a human act, its point of suspension is shifted toward the fulcrum, and it is balanced with less opposing weight. There can be so little of self in the

[2] *Paradiso,* XXVIII, 41.

motivating force of an evil act as to assign the point of suspension over the first *s*. In this case the leverage of the act is so slight that though the sin be mortal, the first circle of Hell will balance it. On the left arm of the scale there are two words:

Mercy may be conceived to have a set of weights made by the infinite understanding of God. The points of suspension on the left of the fulcrum never change. The weights hang at the initial letter of Justice and of Mercy.

The scale for the virtuous is similar to that of the condemned:

The word selflessness occupies the place, in this scale, that selfishness held in the scale for the guilty. There are twelve letters in this word, and only eleven are used as markers on the balance. We may dedicate the space at the extreme

of the right arm to the highest human act of selflessness ever seen upon earth: the Crucifixion with its infinite sacrifice.

Some such single standard of judgment as these scales represent must have guided Alighieri in his search for the specific gravity of sin, else he could not have rendered such a harmonious conception of the chaos of Hell; such a symphony of splendor in his attempt to picture Heaven.

Confusion exists in every section of the *Inferno,* but each spot of that evil dwelling place is possessed of a distinct type of turmoil graduated by the author's arrangement. In following the pilgrims down toward the nether Hell, the reader is conscious of a greater punishment for a greater gravity of offense: for a greater negation of renouncement. As circle by circle he descends, the reader senses Dante's evaluation of each deeper grade of selfishness as exemplified in some specific sin. The aim is not to untangle the infinitely complicated conscience of a sinner, but to grade the transforming elements which, if assumed by the human soul, will transmute him from a saint into a sinner; from a sinner into a saint.

Two commandments contain "the Law and the Prophets": Love God; love thy neighbor. Love is service, not sentiment. Love is the giv-

ing of self and of possessions. Its contrary is the withholding of self, the seeking for personal gain to the disadvantage of one's neighbor: the defrauding of rights. Love is renouncement; its contradictory is greed in some form.

There is occasion in *The Divine Comedy* for bewilderment to the mind of the casual reader because of the promiscuous placement of souls guilty of the same type of sin. Not a few commentators who have made a serious study of Dante make note of this fact as an error. Some excuse the discrimination on the plea of the enormity of the author's undertaking; others mention it is an inaccuracy akin to the author's confusing the identity of the Pope, Anastasius II, with the contemporary Emperor of the same name.[3] If the scale given above is accepted, we shall try to prove that the placement of souls was made with the deliberation customary in the actions of Alighieri. Sinners were placed according to the tincture of selfishness in their guilt.

It is true that carnality, for example, is punished in Circle Two in the *Inferno;* yet we find pandars in Circle Eight. This is because the author weighed the circumstances attendant upon sin in determining the culpability of a sinner. Avarice falls to Circle Four; yet simon-

[3] *Inferno,* XI, 8.

ists, peculators, thieves, and forgers, all certainly guilty of some form of avarice, are condemned to Circle Eight with flatterers, diviners, hypocrites, evil counsellors, and sowers of dissension. The violent suffer in Circle Seven; yet murderers are found also in Circle Nine, the last chill depth of the funnel of torment.

Mercy's plea, where there is the possibility of claiming extraordinary temptation or human weakness, was a potent factor in Dante's decisions. He considered man as a physical being with all the craving for food, comfort, and pleasure common to living beings. He saw in him certain potential instincts for the preservation of life and the perpetuation of the race. The material cloak of the soul demands food for its continued existence, and glories in the exercise of its every faculty. Man may not be indifferent to discomforts because pain and suffering are health-guards; they are the natural danger-calls which the body gives when appealing to the mind for help. Every faculty of the body corresponds to a need of the individual or of the race. Hunger is not to be despised, but gluttony is a sin. Prudence suggests that a man look to the needs of the morrow; yet should he guard against avarice. He should defend his rights and his dignity without imposing duties on other men. Temperance must ever

guide the exercise of virtue, lest it become vice. The sins of incontinence as recognized by Dante: carnality, gluttony, avarice, anger, and heresy plead, at first, the satisfaction of cravings as needs of the flesh and later assert a mastery over the soul. Mercy might find a way to save sinners so snared by temptation were it not for Justice. God's bestowal of revelation and free will to every man gives Justice the deciding power where malice caused the sin.

The negative prefix in the word in-continent suggests that the criminal action is not performed without a struggle. A child who is untruthful is prone to become an adult who deliberately lies. But while the habit of sin is new, it is looked upon as a matter worthy of slight concern. Sins suddenly realized to be serious are like falls over a precipice that one knew to be near, and yet, somehow, thought to be more distant. No such chance error is committed with a deliberate plan for unlawful personal gain. Such plans rob Mercy of weight in the decision.

A test of this train of thought is evinced in the text of the *Inferno*. In Canto Five, Dante questions Francesca, who with Paolo, suffers in

> . . . a place void of all light, which
> bellows like the sea in tempest, when it is
> combated with warning winds.[4]

[4] *Inferno*, V, 28.

Explaining her presence in Hell, the tormented soul makes the following reply:

Love, which is quickly caught in gentle heart
. . . Love led us to one death . . .[5]

One day, for pastime, we read of Lancelot,
how love constrained him; we were alone,
and without all suspicion.

Several times that reading urged our eyes to meet,
and changed the color of our faces;
but one moment alone it was that overcame us.

When we read how the fond smile was kissed
by such a lover, he who shall never be
divided from me,

Kissed my mouth all trembling . . .
that day we read in it no farther.[6]

Thus sin clothed in the garb of lawful pleasure knocks at the door of souls. Granted entrance, it holds sway by an overpowering temptation; and while Mercy cannot plead the inability of the soul to resist even sudden temptation, it does so influence Justice that these weaklings suffer among the least tormented.

Rememberest thou not the words wherewith thy ethics treat of the three dispositions which Heaven wills not,

Incontinence, malice, and mad bestiality? and how incontinence less offends God, and receives less blame?[7]

To prevent the loss of human regard sometimes consequent to sin it is customary to do

[5] *Inferno*, V, 100.
[6] *Ibid.*, V, 127–139.
[7] *Ibid.*, XI, 79–85.

one of two things: to assume an apostolate for the purpose of proving that the sin is not a sin at all, and that the world would be much better, and certainly much happier, if more of its inhabitants knew the method of striking a burdensome prohibition from among the demands of Christ's teaching; or to assume the rôle of hypocrite and learn how to smile above the secret consciousness of coal-black guilt. Heresy, the first mentioned alternative, ranks in Circle Six: hypocrisy Dante places in Circle Eight, among the fraudulent.

This explanation is given in the Circle of the Heretic: between the incontinent and the malicious. The heretic has given up the struggle with temptation, as such, and has paused to justify himself before offering a complete surrender to desire; for some tenets are more difficult to hold during stress than are others. All men are willing to concede that a straight route of travel should be laid between two important points of trade—all men except those who would incur loss of property by the construction of the road. On receiving an authoritative message there is response of pleasure, of indifference, or of question according as the command meets the previous plans of the one commanded. Men become so accustomed to pointing error in a man-made law that curbs de-

sire, that they are sometimes tempted to waive the laws of God with a like superior gesture. Dante pictures dangers in a long enduring life, dangers that are not lessened by argument, kept out by bolts of iron, nor prevented by drawing down the blinds.

The least guilty among the violent in Circle Seven are those who, for personal gratification, snatch the rights of freedom and life from others. The simple tyrant suffers less than the murderer; and beneath the homicide we meet the ruthless warrior. The lowest type of violence against one's neighbor, according to Dante's classification, is represented by the highwayman, who may not plead the duties of a sovereign, who is not provoked to murder by sudden wrath, nor excited in the fury of battle, by the blood of war; but who deliberately makes it his profession to swoop down on righteous, unoffending people, and by threat of death, to demand their earnings for his selfish gain.

Next in the Circle of the Violent is the suicide:

> When the fierce spirit quits the body, from which it has torn itself, Minos sends it to the seventh gulf.
>
> It falls into the wood, and no place is chosen for it; but wherever fortune flings it, there it sprouts, like grain of spelt; [8]

[8] *Inferno,* XIII, 94–100.

. . . our bodies shall be suspended,
each on the thorny tree of its tormented shade.[9]

The ingrates who reject every gift of God, even life itself, are outdone among the violent only by those who blaspheme the name of their Creator.

But the violent bear some risk for their gain. Dante, delving for the depth of sin, sought yet lower and found a cautious, wicked group who grasp the gain of the incontinent and the violent and at the same time stand in no danger of the fury of vengeance of any one. Their deeds are "not those of the lion but those of the fox." [10] They profit by studying the weaknesses of their neighbors; then they aid the tempted in their performance of evil. Dante has classified these thieves of virtue in the following order: seducers and pandars, flatterers, simonists, diviners, peculators, hypocrites, thieves, evil counsellors, sowers of dissension, and forgers. The last named do not even meet their victims. They preserve no semblance of fair play and just dealing.

There is left but one further degree of degradation, one longer reach of selfish grasp, to witness in our dismal journey through heat and filth and shivering misery. The traitorous fraud who sells trust is at the end of our exploration

[9] *Inferno*, XIII, 108. [10] *Ibid.*, XXVII, 75.

of Hell. The lives of trusting kindred, the safety of a native land, the human life of God: all have been held in the palms of human hands. Anything so held can be thrown away to free that hand for coin. Those who have thus prized pearls of price are held in the frozen Cocytus of Dante's conception, gnawing each other's flesh.

There is relief in the realization that we have passed the depths of the Deep and that, with the guide and Dante, we may "return into the bright world." We are glad to distinguish,

> . . . through a round opening
> the beauteous things which Heaven bears; and
> thence we issue out, again to see the stars.[11]

There is the relief of leaving a terrible thing behind us, and a reverent curiosity to know what more of the Great Hereafter is hidden from our gaze. We feel a living interest in,

> . . . that second realm, where the
> human spirit is purged and becomes worthy to
> ascend to Heaven.[12]

It was a discerning thought that made choice of The Garden of Paradise, the scene of the first sin, for the Mount of Purgation. We pause for a brief space contemplating the beauty and peace of the wide expanse of the sky, doubly beautiful in its power to dispel

[11] *Inferno*, XXXIV, 137. [12] *Purgatorio*, I, 4.

the haunting horrors that hold our memory. Our attention is soon attracted by an old man apparently absorbed in deep thought:

I saw near me an old man solitary, worthy of such great reverence in his mien that no son owes more to a father.

Long he wore his beard and mingled with white hair like unto his locks of which a double list fell on his breast.[13]

He challenges our presence and we learn, through Virgil, and somewhat to our surprise, that he is Cato the Younger, a pagan, and a suicide, who contrived to have himself appointed an outside guard to the realm of Purgatory. He speaks of the shores of the island as "my rocks" and Virgil deigns to make him a lengthy explanation for his own presence and that of his companion. Finally he begs the privilege of exploring Purgatory.

The reader, surprised, invites no controversy; but sifts the words of Virgil to discover by what possible claim the old Stoic is permitted the rôle of proprietor in the Church Suffering. But the very name that we have called him, synonymous as it is with the quality of self-discipline, is, in part, an explanation for Dante's appointment. Cato sought freedom and, in the taking of his own life, he had nothing of re-

[13] *Purgatorio*, I, 31.

bellion in his spirit; he was more a martyr to the tenets of his own belief, than a coward fleeing earthly responsibility; he trusted the best gods that he knew, and preferred their judgment to a surrender to Cæsar. If a pagan could be a martyr to religion, Cato doubtless deserves the name.

> The rays of the four holy lights adorned his face so with brightness, that I beheld him as were the sun before him.[14]

Justice, prudence, fortitude, and temperance, "the four holy lights," rank high in the scale of selflessness; thus Virgil refers to the "great day" of General Judgment with something of congratulation, because the "raiment" which Cato's soul had left in Utica would on that day "be so bright." We witness here the *Scale of Justice* employed in the determination of the comparative gravity of venial sins.

In the consideration of evil, on the Mount of Purgatory, we first meet the sins of most greedy nature because we are beginning our exploration at the base of the mountain to work toward the summit of perfection. The great hill is cut in tiers, each of which is devoted to the expurgation of some one of the seven capital sins. Dante has accepted an ar-

[14] *Purgatorio*, I, 37.

rangement of these sins in an order somewhat different from that usually given by the followers of St. Thomas. Instead of pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth, we meet evil in the following classification: pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust.

In Cantos XVII and XVIII the pilgrims are standing in conversation as we saw them before in the *Inferno,* in the Circle of Heretics. They are discussing the comparative malice of sin. On the Ledge of Sloth they stand, where souls that have never known the impress of honest, devoted toil now see its value and run ceaselessly in order that, strengthened, they may yet bear fruit of selfless character. The pilgrims witness, on the first terrace, the souls of pride bent low under their heavy burdens, singing the praises of humility, raising a canticle of hope:

> Heed not the form of the pain; think what followeth, think that at worst beyond the great judgment it cannot go.[15]

The habit of thought, based on craving for human admiration, frays here and loses its strength. Souls who have borne the heat and burden of their day laboriously hanging tinsel on the barren branches of their daily lives to

[15] *Purgatorio,* X, 109.

gain the praise of men: proud souls, have yet the honest burden of personal effort toward growth to carry for their God. Theirs is the accumulated load that has been shirked for a lifetime. Effort is not new to them; they may not deny that they have been stiff-necked in their comportment, but at least the proud soul has not been lazy; it requires effort to make even artificial fruit. Why is the carrying of a burden part of the purgatorial way for the sin of pride? Is the vain soul bent under the huge weight of stone because it tied the fruit of its neighbor's tree upon its own? Let us note what Virgil is saying:

> There is he who through his neighbor's abasement hopes to excel, and solely for this desires that he be cast down from his greatness.[16]

Then remembering the confession of Guido del Duca:

> My blood was so inflamed with envy, that if I had seen a man make him glad, thou wouldst have seen me suffused with lividness.[17]

the guide describes a soul enslaved by envy:

> There is he who fears to lose power, favor, honor and fame because another is exalted, wherefore he groweth sad so that he loves the contrary; [18]

[16] *Purgatorio,* XVII, 115.
[17] *Ibid.,* XIV, 82.
[18] *Ibid.,* XVII, 118.

These victims of self-worship, as also those guilty of wrath, are placed among carved examples of the virtue offended; and they are required in expiation to practise the virtue itself. Dante did not forget the dictum of Hugo of St. Victor: "There are two things which repair the divine likeness in man, the beholding of truth and the exercise of virtue." The envious, with their eyelids wired shut, cannot find edification in beautiful sculpture, and so they learn the beauty of well-wishing through voices that tell of generous love.

Virgil classifies the seven capital sins under three headings. Defective love—sloth—is repaired on the cornice on which the pilgrims stand in conversation; the three sins of perverted love—pride, envy, and wrath—they have seen expiated in the three terraces below them; and the three sins of excessive love—avarice, gluttony, and lust—are "mourned for above us in three circles." This in no wise contradicts the principle of Dante's *Scale of Justice;* for the three sins of perverted love, classed in the lowest scale, are sins not only of self gratification; but such as incline toward injustice to the neighbor. Sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust claim less of malice, yet:

> Each one apprehends vaguely a good wherein the mind may find rest, and desires it; wherefore each one strives to attain thereto.
>
> If lukewarm love draw you toward the vision of or the gaining of it, this cornice after due penance, torments you for it.[19]

In the *Paradiso,* Dante is led to the Empyrean by Beatrice. They pass from planet to planet above, beginning with the inconstant moon, wherein are found souls who aimed at the heroic, and bound themselves to extraordinary obligations; then finding vows difficult, and dispensation possible, they remained within the letter of the law and yet reclaimed the object of their former renouncement. Next rank those of great attainment whose generous actions were tainted with somewhat of personal ambition; third, those in whom earthly love was the motivating force. They are the three least selfless of all the classes who have attained the Great Award. Above them are those who worked directly for God with prudence, fortitude, justice or temperance. The spirit of renouncement in the *Paradiso* will form a separate chapter, and for that reason only casual reference to the subject is made here, to show the consistency of the author's arrangement of rewards and punishments meted out to human acts as weighed on his Scale.

[19] *Purgatorio,* XVII, 127.

CHAPTER V

RENOUNCEMENT THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN *PARADISE LOST* AND *THE INFERNO*

IT WOULD seem that, before *Paradise Lost* took form, the years had swept from the life of its author most of the valued things of this world's substance. Milton had seen defeat of the principles he represented; he had known the pain of domestic disappointment; he had grown blind. There is a parallel in Dante's life. Before he wrote the *Inferno* time had snatched from him property, the city of his birth, the home and towers he was wont to love; and as he watched them drift beyond even the horizon which measured the last hope of their return, earth itself began to grow unreal to him and he became absorbed in the affairs of the spirit.

There are many points of distinction, however, between the two epics; although both poems treat of lost spirits led by Lucifer in rebellion against God. The languages of the compositions are of different quality. The measured rhythm of English blank verse stands in contrast

to the musical, vivid Italian in triple rhyme. The form is different, the purpose of the writing is different. Milton composed his great epic under the stress of presenting a deep truth in beautiful and attractive style to a needy literary public. Dante wrote the *Commedia* to relieve his pent soul of the crushing burden of human injustice. But the most notable distinction between the two masterpieces is the evident attitude of each author toward the spirit of renouncement. Milton chooses other points of beauty and strength, Dante builds his entire theme to enshrine the spirit of sacrifice.

The mediæval mind, bereft of every tangible possession, sought personal comfort in a Beyond that would hold the fruit of his enforced loss. This assurance gave him conscious dignity despite his worn garments; despite the bread of charity which was his food. Dante then, expelled from Florence, believed himself to be still possessed of the treasures of life. He had life itself and in it health, a mentality capable of active pleasure in many new experiences, a memory rich in treasure, and finally his highest qualification, the power to commune with his Creator Who, unseen, influenced life upon earth so intimately and promised a life to come.

Earthly life was uncertain, and being a wise man, he looked beyond time and into the possi-

bilities of the future life seeking consolation. Earth will never again hold this experienced philosopher in the chains of material bonds. He is no longer absorbed in the battles and ambitions of the world, except in so far as they affect that inner spirit of man which lives unto eternity. He is affrighted at the soul-dangers through which he has passed without fear. He is puzzled and "cannot rightly tell" how it was that he wandered from the path of righteousness, "so full of sleep was I about the moment that I left the true way" [1] "in the dark wood where the straight way was lost." [2] It is interesting to observe this earnest pilgrim, a firm believer in every teaching of the old dogmatic Church, as he looks about in the "wild and rough and stubborn wood" [3] to determine the course of his journey toward salvation. So absorbed was this mediæval contemplative in the problems of Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory that time quite slipped from his vision and left before his wondering gaze the romance of creation that he has shown us in the rich fragrant growth which we know as the Italian epic. An epitome of thirteenth century philosophy and religion is the *Divine Comedy,* so rooted in deep belief that it cannot die. The sodden

[1] *Inferno,* I, 10.
[2] *Ibid.,* I, 2.
[3] *Ibid.,* I, 5.

years have strewn themselves over it; but it blooms like a living vine of trailing arbutus, as fragrant and fresh after the centuries as when it first saw light.

Both epics are living, personal things. The souls of their authors expressed their convictions naked and new before the world. Dante, struggling between desire and conscience in all but the throes of death, hour after hour, day after day, has so left in this last creation of his mind the impress of his experience that a reader is touched with the power and beauty of the man's personality. It seems evident that the original concept of the work is the result of the confusion in the Florentine's mind because of Divine Providence's permitting the material prosperity of the wicked. The work is unique in this: it is a lengthy literary product that was conceived, not for readers but for the satisfaction of the author himself. It is not in the least morbid; it is a wholesome deep consideration of concrete facts for the intrinsic value of the facts themselves.

Dante had given of his best to Florence; yet it was the decision of Florence that he had failed utterly. Lesser men were ruling in his absence with apparent success; cunning sat in judgment on justice; bribery smoothed the palm of the irate rebel, and even the men who

had pledged absolute loyalty were, in the time of his need, no longer within reach of his voice. His wife and family, to whom he had given his very soul, could offer nothing greater than pity for themselves at the disgrace brought upon them by his tactless conduct. From his new point of vantage he watched success succeed in his less gifted neighbors. They elbowed their way into local prominence with furtive glances at yet distant pinnacles of fame.

Of what is a hero made? He asked himself. Is heroism determined by the size and firmness of a man's grasp of gain? Is there no thought of justice in the world's applause? None. That man is wisest, in the philosophy of the day, who satisfies desire when he can and as he may. Proverbs had said that success is proof of worth. History had repeated this, and even those who denounced the principle lived by its practice. Selfishness had a bad reputation, but each successful man seemed to find it necessary to the accomplishment of his individual aims. Dante had seen few take upon themselves the burden of renouncement unassisted by the force of circumstance, and he was not sure that those few were unregretful of their sudden, generous impulse.

All of this formed the "dark wood," in the midst of which Alighieri asked himself if

Heaven were worth the price of clinging to principle. And he tried to picture the Hell which those inherit who shift soul-responsibility and live for earth. He built his inquiry upon experience and reason, and he searched revelation for the reply of Truth. He would consult the writings of Thomas Aquinas, that theologian whose death, at the age of forty-nine, when Dante was a mere boy, if he ever was a boy, he remembered well; for there had been a deep and general regret at the passing of that fruitful mind. His canonization was even now under consideration in Rome. His theological reasoning would reveal the secret workings of Divine Justice which overbalance the ill-considered decisions of the world. With the works of the saintly doctor as a text-book, the searcher would find justice wherever it might be.

Dante was working amid the silence of solitude, literature, and prayer to discover the atomic weight of sin. Had his troubled mind really grasped the enormousness of the project which he proposed to himself, in attempting to find the answer to so infinitely great a problem, it is likely that even he would have abandoned the task. Did not St. Paul sum up his entire vision in one sentence? He who had been lifted into Heaven [4] and who had seen with bodily

[4] *St. Paul*, 2 C. 12, 1–2.

eyes the wonder and grandeur of it all, left our realization of it wholly to the dull imagination of men whose mortal eyes would look but on things of clay. Feeling the inadequacy of gross man-created words as pigments to paint the gorgeous actuality, he who had looked upon God's masterpiece of joy, to be claimed by such of his children as bring their souls back safe through the smoke of battle to His anxious arms, said of his experience merely: "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive what God hath in store for those who love Him." [5]

Shall we consider the Saint as niggardly in the description of his experience, or may we feel that language fell silent before the reality? The amazement of having been snatched from earth to Heaven left the mind of St. Paul with the power of only an indistinct recollection of his experience. And while he could reverently contemplate the sublimely incomprehensible memory, he seems to have felt his inability to translate the glorious scenes into symbols that other human minds could grasp.

But what the Apostle of the Gentiles would not attempt, Dante dared to try; for he had never seen behind the clouds of mystery. His purpose was not to teach but to learn. His

[5] *St. Paul*, 1 C. 2, 9. *Isaias*, 64–4.

grave soul considered the earth empty and, granting the justice of God, inexplicable, when life is judged within the limits of man's birth and death. The lonely idealist would gather bits of revelation sufficient in number to make a unified whole that would explain Creation: its purpose, its power and its justice. Could not a drop of water reflect the whole sky? He worked primarily for the freedom of his own powerful soul, and only later he conceived the idea of helping others and giving glory to the gracious name of Beatrice. His eternity is to the reality only as a clay model compared to a finished basilica; but it is a possible eternity builded small enough to be grasped as a whole by the human intellect and large enough to contradict no word of Divine revelation. It is a complete and perfectly proportioned edifice wherein are placed all types of humanity, classified according to a single standard of gradation.

The immediate result of a moral force was now of no greater concern to Dante than a turn in the road on the way to a final goal. No catastrophe is considered tragic by him simply because at a certain point in human existence a soul slips from its body leaving the clay chill and heavy in some saddened spot of earth. Life now is tragedy, in the eyes of this seer, if a

spirit realizes, all too late, the utter worthlessness of the wares which it has collected when at the final bend in a crooked journey it meets its God. Tragedy is death to hope, not death to the physical companion of the soul. The degree of sacrifice or of selfishness which determines the conduct of the lives, chosen as types throughout the *Divine Comedy,* measures also the degrees of praise or of blame which these characters receive at Dante's hand.

Infinite sacrifice, perfect renunciation, seen in the Person of the Son of God, meets reward in the height of Dante's Heaven. Other men, enthusiastic for a cause, are seen to have risked life and to have lost it; some for a nation, some for family, some for a mad dream that, had it come true, must have lived a moth's brief life. In proportion as each life was selfless is its merit high. Thus is the topmost point assigned to the Hero who knowing everlasting life in the fulness of its peace, its joy, its blissful power, offered to fit Himself within the narrow range of manhood's sphere; to learn the pinch of cold and want; to meet the shock of the fiendish exultation of a mob whose momentary triumph bade Him die and named His shameful death.

Other heroes might boast of their power to bear what pain occasion could require for the

fulfilment of a great design; but pain is in their lot with or without their choice. The first place in Dante's Heaven is held by a Man who being also God had strength of soul to reach His hand from out of Heaven's safe domain, to grasp the fate of earthly failure, and publicly to claim it as his own. The fruit of that Renouncement is the *Paradiso's* zenith, wherein is light and wonder, joy, harmony, and peace.

Dogmatic truth has enormous carrying power; thus it is without presumption that Dante, who bases his entire conception of eternity upon the teaching of St. Thomas, and other theologians, dares to say:

> Within this kingdom's amplitude no chance point may have place, no more than sadness may, nor thirst, nor hunger;
>
> Because established by eternal law is whatsoe'er thou seest, so that the correspondence is exact between the ring and the finger.[6]

Gradually the eyes of the beholder are raised toward the eternal light. His vision is directed toward the Blessed Mother:

> Look now upon the face which is most likened unto Christ; for its brightness, and no other, hath power to fit thee to see Christ.[7]

Then St. Bernard offers a prayer to the Mother of God that Dante may be permitted

[6] *Paradiso*, XXXII, 52. [7] *Ibid.*, XXXII, 85.

to complete his vision. Having ventured through the dread realms of the *Inferno,* the sad heights of expiation in the *Purgatorio,* having been lifted into the *Paradiso,* and there raised from planet-height to height again above, the pilgrim will be granted now to look on God:

> Bernard gave me the sign and smiled to me that I should look on high, but I already of myself was such as he would have me.[8]

And here one would be led to believe that a real vision was proffered the poet:

> As is he who dreaming seeth, and when the dream is gone the passion stamped remaineth, and naught else cometh to the mind again;
>
> even such am I; for almost wholly faileth me my vision, yet doth the sweetness that was born of it still drop within my heart.[9]

This is the height of virtue's reward as measured on the scale of sacrifice. Now let us see what greed will buy in the Distant Realm. Whom has Dante placed in the lowest depth of Hell? Reason tells us that, if the author is consistent, the lowest point in the *Inferno* is held by one whose renouncement measures zero, and whose selfishness is as near to infinity, in degree, as the power of a creature can attain. This will be, then, not one who merely claims all of his rights for his own pleasure; but one who

[8] *Paradiso,* XXXIII, 49. [9] *Ibid.,* XXXIII, 58.

oversteps the claims of others, if the property of his neighbor chances to fill his desire. The man whose sins cause him to gravitate lowest will take all and give nothing; he will betray the Donor of his all in the hope of further gain; he will barter the life of God. Dante pictures him buried in the abyss occupied by the Prince of Hell, and with his head hidden in the savage mouth of Lucifer.

"That soul up there which suffers greatest punishment," said the Master, "is Judas Iscariot, he who has his head within, and outside plies his legs." [10]

This is in the Judecca, the deepest circlet of the lowest Hell, reserved for traitors to benefactors. The arch-tempter, Lucifer, himself a traitorous rebel, suffers here also. He is held the more firmly embedded in the dread chill of his prison by the ice which is formed by the constant action of his own mighty wings; he continues in his eternal effort toward a freedom which will never be his:

The emperor of the dolorous realm, from mid breast stood forth out of the ice; [11]

The mighty monster has three faces, as pictured by Dante, and:

Under each there issued forth two mighty wings of size befitting such a bird; sea-sails I never saw so broad.

[10] *Inferno,* XXXIV, 61. [11] *Ibid.,* XXXIV, 28.

> No plumes had they; but were in form and
> texture like a bat's and he was flapping
> them, so that three winds went forth from him.
> Thereby Cocytus all was frozen; [12]

Mystery holds enormous literary possibilities. Both Goethe and Milton wove themes of gripping interest placed in the mysterious setting of the spirit world. The reader revels in the grasp of thought by which these great minds grapple with the incalculable forces, which flash through the limiting film of time, bending wills and touching human hearts to action. The portrayals are marvels of beauty and awe-inspiring incidents. But Goethe depicts an unfair situation in which the strong love of a woman, all-condoning, begs forgiveness from God for the man who broke her heart. She obtains pardon for him without his repentance. There is no balance here; for a man who is unworthy of even earthly happiness is permitted to take his filthy heart, unwashed, into the clean company of precious souls. In the *Divine Comedy,* the thesis of justice, there is shown the love of a strong woman, all-inspiring, who chides the conscience of the man who loves her and brings him to the choice of high resolve.

Milton presents, as does Goethe, a story that waives the rights of the Creator and finds bal-

[12] *Inferno,* XXXIV, 46.

ance for the theme in the independent spirit of an unconquered foe. This difference of attitude in two men of depth with like experiences in life, both intense, both ambitious, both exiles (for Milton too was forced from the work of his choice into an exile-loneliness to which blindness sentenced him), challenges explanation. Milton lived ten years beyond the measure of Dante's life. But the distinctive cause of contrast in their work, is the dissimilarity in the age-spirit in which they lived, the difference in their souls, the distinction in the core of life itself, the heart of religion. Dante was fiercely Catholic, more Catholic than some of the churchmen that he knew; and Milton was fiercely anti-Catholic. It is interesting to observe the attitude of the two poets toward the cause and actual purpose of the Inferno, toward the actual circumstance of Redemption. The fibre employed by each in the structure of his epic may illustrate the contention that renouncement marks Catholic poetry.

Milton lived at a time when Protestants protested, when rebellion was looked upon as a commendable exercise of strength. It required bravery then as now, for a small man to make a disagreeable statement to a large one; and sympathy inclines toward bravery. There may be occasions when such courage becomes iden-

tical with impudence; but a mind in the spirit of protest is not quick to see that identity. Milton was the product of early seventeenth century unrest in England; Dante held mediæval principles. Milton regarded rebellion as progress; Dante considered restraint to be at the base of good order and peace.

Try as he would, Milton could make nothing other than a hero of Lucifer, who dared to stand before the throne of God and offer challenge. When that splendid rebel, intoxicated by the consciousness of his magnetic power, and confident of his strength in the admiring thoughts of the lesser spirits, dared to declare war in Heaven, Milton applauded the hazard.

The worsted combatant makes no admission of defeat:

> . . . The fierce contention brought along
> Innumerable force of spirits armed
> That durst dislike His reign, and, me preferring,
> His utmost power with adverse power opposed
> In dubious battle on the plains of Heaven,
> And shook His throne.[13]

There is pride of achievement in that sentence; the rebels were not conquered nor do they seem conscious of having been permanently defeated. There is triumph in the boast of "dubious battle" with the power of the Almighty

[13] *Paradise Lost*, I, 100.

God of Hosts. There is glory in the assertion that the strength of rebellious forces "shook His throne."

Satan, banished, retains the dignity of his angelic station. The non-Catholic poet seems to have conceived an extent of space created by God, but beyond the reach of the "tyranny of Heaven." [14] In the Hell of Milton's conception there is also a connoted love and loyalty among the inmates: "All is not lost," [15] Satan comforts his followers; and he speaks repeatedly of himself and his fallen adherents as a united body, using the pronouns "we" and "us" in addressing them. Beelzebub, still possessed of the prerogatives of a knightly brother, congratulates the leader who

> Fearless, endangered Heaven's perpetual King
> And put to proof His high supremacy
> Whether upheld by strength or chance, or fate!" [16]

The hope of Lucifer is still high; and there is rest and time for thought and consideration:

> But see! The angry victor hath recalled
> His ministers of vengeance and pursuit
> Back to the gates of Heaven: . . .
> Let us not slip the occasion, . . .
> And re-assembling our afflicted powers
> Consult how we may henceforth most offend
> Our enemy; [17]

[14] *Paradise Lost*, I, 124.
[15] *Ibid.*, I, 106.
[16] *Ibid.*, I, 131.
[17] *Ibid.*, I, 169.

The lofty diction of Milton catches even the unsympathetic reader and holds him in admiration before the sweep of power in the unconquerable will of the Evil One while in insolent bravado he draws himself up to the full height of his dignity to call back

> Farewell, happy fields,
> Where joy forever dwells! Hail, horrors! Hail,
> Infernal world! and thou, profoundest Hell,
> Receive thy new possessor! one who brings
> A mind not to be changed by place or time.
> The mind is its own place, and in itself
> Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.
> What matter where, if I be still the same,
> And what I should be . . .?" [18]

"And what I should be": when Milton, a zealous contributor to religious tracts, permits the devil to claim to be what he should be, he is obviously carried away by his theme. Again and again the archtraitor summons his loyal cohorts,[19] and they render voluntary, loyal service; not constrained submission.

> . . . Thither, winged with speed,
> A numerous brigade hastened; as when bands
> Of pioneers, with spade and pickaxe armed,
> Forerun the royal camp, to trench a field,
> Or cast a rampart.[20]

Beauty, and joy of achievement in the crea-

[18] *Paradise Lost*, I, 249.
[19] *Ibid.*, I, 663.
[20] *Ibid.*, I, 674.

tion of their hands are theirs after they set to work to build

. . . in an hour
What in an age they (of earth) with incessant toil
And hands innumerable, scarce perform.[21]

Witness the homage of actual worship which Lucifer receives from his kindred spirits:

Toward him they bend
With awful reverence prone, and as a god
Extol him equal to the Highest in Heaven.[22]

But more surprising than expressions of unity and concord, peace, songs or heroic deeds, and "thoughts more elevate," is the expression of the actual spirit of renouncement with which Milton clothes His Satanic Majesty himself!

. . . how much they praised
That for the general safety he despised
His own.[23]

Milton speaks of temperance;[24] but it is to emphasize its temporal value. Surely we need go no further to be convinced that the standards of equity held by the two great epic writers were diametrically opposed to each other. To stress this is important, because it is the spirit and not the content of the two works which is of interest to us in this consideration.

[21] *Paradise Lost*, I, 697.
[22] *Ibid.*, II, 477.
[23] *Ibid.*, II, 480.
[24] *Ibid.*, VII, 126 *et seq.*

One cannot compare the matter of the Italian epic with that of the masterpiece of Milton, although they both treat of eternity, because the sources and problems of the two works are so entirely different as to render the ideas incommensurate quantities. One is reminded of the queries:

Is there more of health or beauty in the sunshine?
More of wealth or mystery in a mine?
Who can with a balance measure distance?
Who can measure volume with a line?

Thus is the matter of the two epics beyond the possibility of comparison; but the spirit of each stands in deep contrast with that of the other: one is constituted of renouncement and one of rebellion made beautiful. The theme of one is justice; of the other, independence.

Dante rested his epic upon the foundation of revealed truth and tradition; and he had but to add the findings of his late meditations. Milton standing on but the shifting sand of personal experience had first to try, by the exercise of his privilege of private interpretation, to observe, from the incomplete record of Scripture, the pictured incident of the great rebellion of angelic hosts. Then, he had to find a logical consequence of that rebellion, without (and this was important to him) defeating the rebels in any irreparable way.

"Of all malice the end is injury." That was Dante's complete apparatus of weights and measures. It was the scale upon which he placed every new phase of evil which presented itself to his consideration; according to the weight signified thereon, he marked the injury as slight or grievous. Of all rebellion the end is freedom. That was a hope embedded in the soul of Milton, strong advocate of any cause opposed to Rome, sponsor also of the "Root and Branch Pamphlets," directed against the Church of England. So absorbed was this enthusiast with the idea of heroic revolt that he forgot himself and displayed a secret, subconscious bond of sympathy with the spirits in rebellion against God. In Dante, the creature holds an undying responsibility for his conduct; the rights of the Creator are the first rights recognized, and no debtor can cancel his debt by insulting the source of his loan. In Milton, Authority's demand for restraint is tyranny and oppression; the creature's inclination to usurp the rights of others is condoned and rebellion for any cause is worthy of praise. In Dante the rebels feel a heavy loss which they will continue to know throughout eternity; in Milton there is the suggestion of an enormous void in Paradise after the evacuation of the hosts of brilliant spirits that made up the lost legions. One feels

that in the final reckoning Heaven lost in the contest; for the Home of God is less Heaven because of their expulsion, and Hell will be made a Heaven because of the power and presence of the proud spirits of rebellion.

Dante presented a body of truths, enormous in their scope, with a firmness of conviction that knows no wavering. Milton wove a marvelous fabric of the imagination, but both he and his readers are conscious of the harmony of invention, not of the power of truth. It is truly a beautiful structure; in it the author's mind "beat her wings against the prison walls of human thought." But it is poetry in distinct contrast to the spirit of the Catholic poet; for it teaches by pictures done in light, that the Powers of Darkness are more pleasant company and have more interesting diversions than the inhabitants of Heaven. In reading it, there is a tendency to believe that God created better than he knew and made, one time, a force so near co-equal with his own, that He was compelled to fear His creatures. Man appears to be a passive prize for which two nearly equal powers contend, and he is carried very much as chance will have it in the swirl of the tide of contest without personal responsibility.

In the *Paradiso* again Dante places the setting of his action in the soul of man, man as an

individual who has by personal renouncement of immediate pleasures won the reward which Redemption left free for him to gain. The joy depicted is not the pleasure of only a gift received; it holds the added exultation of triumph, the glow of victory which turns each scar of battle to a thing of pride, and "the Heaven laugheth with the beauties of its every district," [25] to bid them welcome "unto this mirth." [26] Milton permits the struggle to remain in the sphere of the supernatural. It concerns man, but it is not man's battle. In *Paradise Regained,* God the Son offers His life in expiation for Eve's misfortune of having been "taken unawares," a circumstance which to Dante's mind would have rendered Redemption unnecessary. Thus we see that the whole treatment of the great subject of salvation is, from the point of view of Dante, a matter of debts and balances; from that of Milton, it is a question of gain without human merit.

[25] *Paradiso,* XXVIII, 83. [26] *Ibid.,* XX, 117.

CHAPTER VI

THE FRUIT OF RENOUNCEMENT IN *THE PARADISO*

Bitter the herb of sacrifice;
Is it in Paradise?
Bitter, in Paradise?
No.

Sweet is the fruit of sacrifice.
It is in Paradise;
Sweet fruit in Paradise,
Know.

IN THE Heaven which Dante depicts all is activity, order, beauty, and joy. There is the total abandon of care, responsibility, the prudence that an enduring happiness on earth would require. There is a wealth of gladness, the fruit of actions, strong and persevering: stern earth-renouncement, ripened above the clouds.

The tree of life fruits at whatever height one wills. In so far as gain is the purpose of an action, temporal gain for self, that act is shown to be profitable for the earth and barren of eternal reward; in so far as self is renounced in earthly life, there is consequent rapture for all eternity as the gift of Heaven.

The first soul encountered in the high realm of joy is Piccarda, who had once aimed at great sacrifice, and then availed herself of an opportunity, within the law, to shirk the responsibility voluntarily assumed. She is content, in the lowest circle, she is even joyous. Dante is permitted to speak with her:

> But tell me, ye whose blessedness is here, do ye desire a more lofty place, to see more, or to make yourselves more dear? [1]

And she replies in perfect peace:

> —the quality of love stilleth our will,
> and maketh us long only for what we have,
> and giveth us no other thirst.[2]

It seems, throughout this division of the *Divina Commedia* in particular, that the quality of love is shown to be the measure of perfection. It is natural for every soul to attach itself in affection to something. Dependence is innate, for each entity of conscious creation; and there is the possibility of varied attachment. A soul in high sanctity may form no substantial attachments apart from God. It will see God in each of his creatures; for in the perfection of a violet lies the promise of its Creator. A generous love for one's fellowman is only a step below personal love for God and it is

[1] *Paradiso*, III, 64. [2] *Ibid.*, III, 70.

a step toward personal love for God. The love of material things or of persons, for one's self-gratification, is, however, directly opposed to the standard of perfection. The gross love of any means directly or indirectly to satisfy the appetite is, in reality, not love; it is known as greed, jealousy or ambition. The fruits of such quality of love are not in Heaven.

The highest love of persons and the love of God hold, as a distinctive quality, the desire to give, which is equivalent to a forgetfulness of self. Generosity permeates the atmosphere of Heaven, as is shown in the continuation of Piccarda's answer:

> Did we desire to be more aloft, our longings were discordant with His will who here assorteth us,
>
> and for that you will see there is no room within these circles, if of necessity we have our being here in love, and if you think again what is love's nature.[3]

Thus Dante is made to understand how the Scale of Justice, previously referred to, may be still applied without contradiction of fact.

> Clear was it then to me how everywhere in Heaven is Paradise, e'en though the grace of the chief Good doth not reign there after one only fashion.[4]

Piccarda tells her own story as though it were

[3] *Paradiso,* III, 73. [4] *Ibid.,* III, 88.

the adventure of another person. She had vowed herself, when yet a girl, to a life of discipline in the Order of St. Clare:

Thereafter men, more used to ill than good, tore
me away from the sweet cloister; and God
doth know what my life then became.[5]

She introduces Constance as one who bore temptation more valiantly:

She was a sister, and from her head was taken
in like manner the shadow of the sacred veil.

Yet turned back as she was unto the world against
her pleasure and against good usage, from her
heart's veil never was she loosened.[6]

Then Dante shows perplexity as to how actual force, physical force, can touch the human soul. It is his first mention of the word justice in this new realm of his thought:

If the right will endureth, by
what justice can another's violence sheer me
the measure of desert? [7]

and the reply of Beatrice leaves room for no equivocation:

—if the will willeth not, it cannot be crushed,
though violence wrench it aside a thousand times,

For should it bend itself, or much or little, it
doth abet the force; and so did these.[8]

The opportunity of winning a martyr's crown had been theirs. If these sisters had loved

[5] *Paradiso*, III, 106.
[6] *Ibid.*, III, 113.
[7] *Ibid.*, IV, 19.
[8] *Ibid.*, IV, 76.

their vows more than the temporal blessing which their release from obligation offered, they would have grasped that opportunity:

If their will had remained intact, like that which
held Lawrence on the grid, and made
Mucius stern against his own right hand,

It would have thrust them back upon the path
whence they were drawn, so soon as they were
loose; but such sound will is all too rare.[9]

The absolute will consenteth not to the ill, but
yet consenteth in so far as it doth fear, should
it draw back, to fall into a worse annoy.[10]

Before he leaves the circle, the investigator probes for truth with one more question:

I would know if man can satisfy you so for
broken vows, with other goods, as not to
weigh too short upon your balance.[11]

But the startled glance of amazement from Beatrice reveals her disappointment in her lover's poor sense of values. She makes no immediate reply, and Dante expresses his confusion:

. . . I became as lost, with eyes downcast.[12]

Finally, having pity on him because of his dust-veiled vision, Beatrice designs to explain in detail: the offering of the will, voluntarily cir-

[9] *Paradiso,* IV, 82.
[10] *Ibid.,* IV, 109.
[11] *Ibid.,* IV, 139.
[12] *Ibid.,* IV, 144.

cumscribed by vow to God, is the highest personal sacrifice possible; because the will is God's greatest gift to man. Thus no substitute for such retracted offering could be its equal:

> Wherefore what thing weigheth so heavy
> in virtue of its worth as to turn every scale,
> can never be made good by any other outlay.[13]

> If sorry greed proclaim aught else to you, be
> men, not senseless sheep.[14]

Dante being satisfied, the pilgrims are drawn rapidly and without effort to the second height of Heaven, where joy is increased in the inhabitants by the addition of every new soul to their circle. More than a thousand come to greet "one who shall increase our loves." [15] Justinian, we find here, and Romeo of Villeneuve, adviser to Raymond Berengar IV of Provence. These men did much for both the government of nations and the love of God; but Dante considered their motives of action to be tainted with a longing for human appreciation. Much of self, in even great actions, encumbers the soul and impedes the spiritual progress of the men themselves. Even when ambition does not retard the benefits to mankind naturally resultant from an effort, it dwarfs the soul of the actor. Powerful as were the minds

[13] *Paradiso*, V, 61.
[14] *Ibid.*, V, 79.
[15] *Ibid.*, V, 105.

of these two men, and gigantic as were their accomplishments, the author ranks them in only Circle II of Paradise.

Adam's sin was one of ambition, and thus he is mentioned here with others who attained salvation despite this sin. Against the dark background of his ingratitude, Dante places the white Cross of the Great Renouncement:

> As for the penalty, then inflicted by the cross,—
> if it be measured by the nature taken on,
> never did any other bite as justly;
>
> and in like manner, ne'er was any so outrageous
> if we look to the Person who endured it, in
> whom this nature was contracted.[16]

Thus a Man, Divine, had power to balance, with infinite atonement, the scale on which hung infinite offense. Redemption was a need unmeasured, and immeasurable, but the voluntary sacrifice of the crucifixion balanced man's debt to his Creator:

> So from one act issued effects apart; God and the Jews rejoiced in the same death; thereat shuddered the earth, and Heaven opened.[17]

"God willed for our redemption this only mode," [18] and here we see again the direct application of the Scale of Justice, on which is balance: "against the ill delight setting just penalty." [19]

[16] *Paradiso,* VII, 40.
[17] *Ibid.,* VII, 46.
[18] *Ibid.,* VII, 56.
[19] *Ibid.,* VII, 84.

Man had not power, within his own boundaries,
ever to render satisfaction; since he might not go
in humbleness by after-obedience so deep down
as in disobedience he had framed to exalt himself on
high; and this the cause why from the power to
render satisfaction by himself man was shut off.
Wherefore needs must God with His own ways
reinstate man in his unmaimed life.[20]

Then the poet is transmitted to a higher plane without either personal exertion or the apparent movement of anything about him. In the planet Venus he again meets souls whose spiritual success was hindered by inordinate human regard. Their aim was not for fame, nor for high general appreciation built upon admiration, alone. Love, as it is ordinarily understood, was the retarding force of the souls in this circle. Dante credited the love of Beatrice with the responsibility of his own salvation; but he saw in that joyous passion, too, a possible hindrance to the perfect love of God. Therefore he placed the plane of human love below the circles of prudence and fortitude. Those virtues which in their exercise do not admit of immediate satisfaction, rank higher in Dante's analysis than do virtues whose exercise is pleasant. Thus they merit for those who practice them a greater joy in Paradise: The greater the renouncement, the higher the reward.

[20] *Paradiso*, VII, 97.

Welcome was heartily accorded Dante and Virgil as they passed among the souls in the sphere of Venus. Filled as are the spirits of this planet with an active love for their fellow-beings, their enthusiasm is swifter and more cordial than that accorded by the friends who were encountered in Circle I, or Circle II. The hidden force of love is the very atmosphere here; Dante is penetrated with an affection for the joyous spirits even before he knows who they are. And happiness grows in them at his interest in their identity:

> Ah! how I saw it wax in quantity and kind at the new joy which, when I spoke, was added to its joys! [21]

In Circle III, we note the sense of brotherhood which the souls, who have conquered, feel for other valiant souls; they seem to know even a sort of divine great fellowship with God. Captivated in this indissoluble union, reading the very thoughts of the Creator's mysteries, they tremble with joy at the remembrance of the dangers they have escaped. Yet the grateful souls are not pained by even retained repentance for their amended faults. One idea, only, absorbs them: God sought them out on a wayward path, and drew them, in secret, to Himself. This mystic sense of a personal bond with

[21] *Paradiso*, VIII, 46.

their Creator, this hidden understanding from which the rest of the world is excluded, fills their souls with peace:

> Yet here we not repent, but smile; not at the sin, which cometh not again to mind, but at the Worth that ordered and provided.
>
> Here gaze we on the Art that beautifieth its so great effect, and here discern the Good which bringeth back the world below into the world above.[22]

In Canto X, we pass from the infra-solar heaven to Circle IV, the first plane above the possible shadow of the earth. Here is an endless profusion of exquisite forms so aglow with strong virtue as to bear the brilliant light of prudence eminent in the sphere of the sun. They are the spirits who walked through life under the constant discipline of self-watchfulness. Inconstancy had no part in their faithful lives; they labored for neither fame nor human love; but for God's name, direct. Dante and Beatrice are recognized as natives of this sphere, and honored by the blessed souls as of their number. The law of God had governed the ideal love of Dante and his "great inspirer"; they claim rank with the prudent in Heaven.

For the first time in his glorious ascent and contemplation of the beauties of Paradise, Dante

[22] *Paradiso,* IX, 103.

becomes so engrossed in his surroundings that he forgets the presence of his guide.

And Beatrice began: "Give thanks, give thanks
To the Sun of the Angels, who of his grace
hath to this sun of sense exalted thee.

Never was heart of mortal so disposed unto
devotion, and so keen to give itself to God
with all its will,

as at those words was I; and so wholly was
my love committed unto Him, it eclipsed
Beatrice in oblivion.

Her it displeased not; but she so smiled thereat,
the splendor of her laughing eyes parted my
erst united mind amongst things multiform.[23]

In this way Dante expresses the relationship that had existed between him and Beatrice. God had come first, in their lives, according to the desire of both. Dante had secretly hoped that Beatrice loved him even after her marriage. The least sign of unhappiness on her part, the least suggestion that her life was a tragedy, could have fired her ardent lover to, perhaps, deeds of desperate character. If there had been ground for Dante's hope, the wisdom of Beatrice did not betray it. Her caution consisted not in skillfully deceiving her husband and writing lamentations to an enraged lover. Her prud-

[23] *Paradiso*, X, 52.

ence was discretion; and, to her, Dante openly avows the debt of his salvation.

The theme of Dante's love-story has been the theme for romance through the centuries: lovers separated by some insurmountable obstacle, long suspense, a final conquest of difficulties; then blissful happiness. Different schools of literature stand distinct in their methods of proposing to reduce hindrances. There is fiction which ignores the impediment of a previous contract of marriage; another type of novel breaks that bond by a ceremony contrary to that of matrimony, called divorce; in a third class of story, death intervenes at the opportune moment, and the hero is free to claim his bride.

But the solution of the love-story problem in the *Divina Commedia* could be none of these. It held the vital element of an agonizing truth that no amount of fiction could adjust. Death had intervened after the unfortunate marriage; but Death had claimed the heroine and left the widower and the lover to mourn her loss. It was a clumsy plot to handle; and had it been but a story even Dante might scarce have labored for a happy ending. It was more than a story; it was his own life-problem. Searching as only personal hunger can impel one, Dante ferreted out a satisfying thing close to his hand.

The enforced renouncement of the company of Beatrice during his world-life is the "insurmountable obstacle"; life itself is the long suspense, and the release of the hero's soul, the final conquest of the difficulty. Heaven would give them the blissful joy which a happy ending demanded, the blissful joy which his great soul craved.

The weaving of the plot made smooth the way over which the weary man wandered on through life; for there was real knighthood in the soul of the "troubadour of Italy," and he would not have wished that Beatrice share his fate. He found it in his heart even to rejoice that she was beyond the reach of his hunger, poverty, and pain; his faith grew strong enough to put today behind him, and to live in his joyous hope of a *Paradiso*. He pictured himself in the Circle of Prudence, with the lady of his song, and she there re-enacted her love for God's law. Placed where she could see his inmost heart, he dared to forget her presence and she felt no resentment: "Her it displeased not." [24] The spirits in Paradise share all that is given to God, with the joy that children know in a father's praise. The atmosphere of Heaven's entire realm is that of giving. It is the passion of Heaven, by

[24] *Paradiso*, X, 60.

which all sing, and love, and seek each other out: by which they join their forces to lift mankind to God.

Triumphant souls of the ages wing their eager way down to meet the pilgrim and make him welcome when he reaches the circle of Prudence. Flocking about him they sing their joy:

> Then saw I many a glow, living and conquering, making of us a center, and of themselves a crown; sweeter in voice than shining in appearance.
>
> When so singing, those burning suns had circled round us thrice, like stars neighboring the fixed poles.[25]

And then this choir of tense gladness, suspended like a great bell above the two whose prudence they would laud, rang out sweet chimes through Heaven:

> —one part drawing and thrusting the other, giveth a chiming sound of so sweet note, that the well ordered spirit with love swelleth;
>
> so did I see the glorious wheel revolve and render voice to voice in harmony and sweetness that may not be known except where joy maketh itself eternal.[26]

Now, having looked upon and known the incomparable joys of Heaven, having met the appreciation of some of the most worthy human

[25] *Paradiso*, X, 64. [26] *Ibid.*, X, 142.

beings which the ages have produced, having glimpsed the realization of God's personal gaze of approval, Dante turns a pitying glance back at the earth that he had left.

> Insensate care of mortals! Oh how false the arguments which make thee downward beat thy wings!
>
> One was following after law, and one aphorisms, one was pursuing priesthood, and one dominion by violence or by quibbles,
>
> and another plunder and another civil business, and one, tangled with the pleasures of the flesh, was moiling, and one abandoned himself to ease;
>
> and whilst from all these things released, with Beatrice up in Heaven thus gloriously was I received.[27]

There is certitude of utterance here, there is confidence of a mastery over life, but above all there is a sense of values which is the fruit of restraint. What other pen has presented to literature such a consummation of an affair of human love?

But the circle of prudence rewards, besides the souls who have been circumspect with their fellowmen, others who have been wise in their attitude toward material goods, those who have handled wealth with care and profit to themselves. St. Thomas, St. Dominic, St. Francis, and

[27] *Paradiso*, XI, 1.

St. Bonaventure are four examples of souls who had enriched themselves for Heaven by their prudence with money. They had worked miracles in number. Volumes have been written on their glorious achievements; but Dante places them in the circle of prudence for apparently one common quality: they all gave their money away. They were all:

> . . . unshod poor brethren, that with the cord made themselves friends to God." [28]

The next plane of happiness is the Circle of the Courageous in the planet Mars. As soon as Dante realized that he had been elevated to the supra-solar region, to the Circle of Fortitude, he again gave thanks:

> With all the heart, and in that tongue which is one unto all, to God I made burnt sacrifice such as befitted this new-given grace; [29]

The distinctive sign of this circle is the Cross of Mars "Pricked out with less and greater lights," [30] and "that cross so flashed forth Christ I may not find example worthy." [31] The music and the beauty of this sphere as pictured in the Florentine's exquisite diction is an experience rather than a description. The souls are the moving lights, bright or less brilliant, according to the greatness of their courageous

[28] *Paradiso*, XII, 131.
[29] *Ibid.*, XIV, 88.
[30] *Ibid.*, XIV, 97.
[31] *Ibid.*, XIV, 104.

achievements when on earth. And, as they move within the huge cross of light, they render music:

> . . . as viol and harp tuned in harmony of many chords make sweet chiming.[32]

Dante meets his great-great-grandfather here. In lengthy discourse this strong soul condemns the cowardly attitude of some in facing daily trials and daily responsibilities. Cacciaguida himself had, under the Emperor Conrad III, joined a crusade and met martyrdom. Dante glories to think that he shares this man's spirit, and proudly owns blood-kinship with such courage. Yet he says high ancestry is not sufficient in itself to warrant contentment. To blood-nobility he addresses the following:

> Yet verily thou art a mantle that soon shrinketh, so that, if day by day there be naught added, time goeth round with the shears.[33]

The old grandsire gives warning, as it were in prophecy, of all of Dante's need of courage; his exile, his poverty, the "ill company with which thou shalt fall down into this vale"; but he comforts his grandson with the knowledge that powerful friends will recognize him at his worth. He bids the pilgrim not to shrink from

[32] *Paradiso*, XIV, 118. [33] *Ibid.*, XVI, 7.

making Florence know its needs in the light of Heaven.

Then suddenly "the white glow of the temperate sixth star" [34] enlightened Dante that he had been raised to the Circle of the Just. Here the souls, free of care and responsibility, disport themselves in flight

> . . . as birds, risen from the bank, as though rejoicing together over their pasture.[35]

forming themselves in one artistic grouping and then another. Finally

> When each one had stilled it in its place, an eagle's head and neck I saw presented by that pricked-out fire.[36]

And they all speak in one voice; for equity is, when understood, not many things, but one. Dante's hope rises as he looks upon the thing of power which justice is. Here he can find the answer to the problem of his life-time:

> Solve, as ye breathe, the great fast which long hath held me hungering, because on earth I found no food for it.[37]

The request brings joy to the just rulers. This is shown by them as a body before they give response:

[34] *Paradiso,* XVIII, 68.
[35] *Ibid.,* XVIII, 73.
[36] *Ibid.,* XVIII, 106.
[37] *Ibid.,* XIX, 25.

> As the falcon issuing from the hood skaketh head and clappeth wings, showing his will and making himself beauteous.[38]

such did they appear; but it would seem that their joy proceeds from the satisfaction of their knowledge rather than any inclination to elucidate the subject for Dante. They themselves gaze on the justice of God with unmeasured satisfaction and sing of it in sweetest cadences, but declare:

> As are my notes
> to thee who understandest them not, such is the eternal judgment to you mortals.[39]

And so Dante had to leave the solution of the problem of his temporal misfortunes until his real journey to eternity should be accomplished. He contents himself with having recognized a number of the just, such as David, Trajan, Constantine, and William of Sicily; and he describes the beauties of the place. Satisfied, but with his curiosity ungratified, he passes to the highest circle of the planet spheres, that of Saturn. Here he meets the temperate, the contemplatives; and so wondrous is it all that Beatrice does not smile, fearing to melt Dante's mortal senses by even that slight added joy:

[38] *Ibid.*, XIX, 34. [39] *Ibid.*, XIX, 97.

for my beauty [40]
. . . were it not tempered, so doth glow as that thy mortal power, at its flash, would be like foliage that the thunder shattereth.[41]

And though music is stilled in this sphere, Dante is overcome with awe. Finally, being permitted to speak, he asks St. Peter Damian "wherefore in this wheel the sweet symphony of Paradise keepeth silence?" Damian answers:

"Thou hast the hearing, as the sight, of mortals,
—wherefore here is no song
for that same reason for which Beatrice hath not smiled." [42]

Neither is Damian permitted to reveal the reason for his appointment as messenger to Dante, but he does tell something of his life on earth; and we find his spirit of renouncement had been strong:

—only with olive-juice viands I lightly traversed heat and cold, satisfied in thoughts contemplative.[43]

St. Damian is made to express the opinion that there should be greater mortification within the cloister than Dante had observed:

That cloister erst bore ample fruit unto these heavens, and is now become so futile, that ere long needs it be revealed.[44]

[40] *Paradiso,* XXI, 7.
[41] *Ibid,* XXI, 10.
[42] *Ibid,* XXI, 61.
[43] *Ibid.,* XXI, 115.
[44] *Ibid.,* XXI, 118.

Continuing, he speaks of St. Peter and St. Paul as the great examples of selfless apostles:

> Cephas came, and the great vessel of the Holy Spirit came, lean and unshod, taking their food from every hostelry.[45]

And over the contrasting conditions of heart between the leaders at the beginning of Christianity and those of Dante's time these souls raise such a cry of lamentation that the pilgrim is frightened, forgetful that in Heaven no injury can come. St. Benedict laments that the rule, which he established with such care, now "abideth there for wasting of the parchments." [46] Other great beginnings, too, he cites, stressing the fact that during the time that renouncement was the spirit of the movement, blessings followed:

> Peter began his gathering without gold or silver,
> And I mine with prayers and fast, and Francis
> his in humbleness.
>
> And if thou scan the beginning of each one, and scan again whither it hath gone astray, thou shalt see the white turned dusky.[47]

With final act of deep faith in the power of the unchanging God, St. Benedict joined the assembly of the saints, and they all rose to the circle of the redeemed and drew Dante with

[45] *Paradiso*, XXI, 127.
[46] *Ibid.*, XXII, 74.
[47] *Ibid.*, XXII, 88.

them. Here engaging in retrospect, Dante "smiled at the sorry semblance" of the earth and again praised the counsel of poverty:

> And that counsel I approve as best which holdeth it (earth) for least; and he whose thoughts are turned elsewhither may be called truly upright.[48]

This eighth circle is the vestibule of the Heaven of Heavens wherein God is seen. The souls of the various spheres are free to come to this height and go as they choose; and there is opportunity to obtain intimate knowledge of the joys of the saints, and the operations of Creation itself. The author does not hesitate before his stupendous task; but he bids his reader pause, and determine whether he cares to follow him. He does not expect to be understood by such as are strangers to the spirit of renouncement:

> It is no voyage for a little bark, that which my daring keel cleaveth as it goeth, nor for a helmsman who doth spare himself.[49]

The joys of tone and color, of harmony and sweetness, of activity and surprise, of freedom, of intimacy, and trust are shown as with a pen of light. But to the very end of the story the author never forgets to reiterate and emphasize the fact that it is all the fruit of mortification, sacrifice, renouncement. If he speaks of

[48] *Paradiso*, XXII, 136. [49] *Ibid.*, XXIII, 67.

the wealth in the rich chests of the Apostles, he refers to them as the "treasure which was earned with weeping"; [50] he addresses St. Peter as "the veteran fore-fighter." [51] And in proving himself familiar with the works of the Prince of the Apostles, he does not mention his miracles, nor his numerous conversions, but "thou didst enter poor and hungry upon the battle-field." [52] How the first Pope fared in the Pontificate is recalled by St. Peter himself when he speaks of the Church as having been "reared upon my blood, and that of Linus and of Cletus." [53] He continues:

> but 'twas for gain of this glad life that Sixtus and Pius, Calixtus and Urban shed their blood after many a tear.[54]

Then after condemning simony and avarice, he bids Dante to make known what he had heard when he should return to earth. Thus Peter left him to continue under the sweet guidance of Beatrice. In most severe phrase does she condemn "greed, who dost abase mortals" [55] and him who neglecting to fast, "devoureth every food in every month." [56]

Thus is the Heaven in Dante's conception shown to be the sweet fruit of the bitter herb.

[50] *Paradiso,* XXIII, 134.
[51] *Ibid.,* XXIV, 59.
[52] *Ibid.,* XXIV, 109.
[53] *Ibid.,* XXVII, 40.
[54] *Ibid.,* XXVII, 43.
[55] *Ibid.,* XXVII, 121.
[56] *Ibid.,* XXVIII, 131.

CHAPTER VII

THE JOYS ABOVE THE SEVENTH HEAVEN

STUDENTS of early history tell us that migrating peoples, who had learned the processes of making brick, were loath to adopt the ready building material which the hills of rock afforded in new lands. Custom is a strong force in the lives of men; the best that they have known pleads for a continuance till better is experienced. Thus inhabitants of earth fear that an unknown Heaven will be disappointing.

Hints of its perfection frighten the normal man, when he contemplates Paradise; for the normal man, when he takes time to think, is truly humble. Time has tempered humanity to find pleasure and satisfaction in the gifts of its hand: Christ and his best loved ones, when on earth, showed little disposition for these gifts, and mayhap Heaven is designed without including them. Having given up bliss to work among men for the Redemption of the world, the Son of God passed palaces and thrones to ask a lodging for His childhood in a cottage home;

to see earth first, as man, from within a shepherd's cave. "Perchance 'tis what one ought to like," the weak one reasons, "and I may like it There; but I should much prefer long life and comfort here."

Though it connote another's need, man would prefer the sharing of a trifle with a loved one, to feasting in a formal Heaven, with harps atune; he would prefer a personal thought, to the sharing of a great general blessing; he might prefer old bronzes, with the mark of time upon them, to pure gold ever-new. Since the first unmeasured hour in the Garden of Paradise, earth has perhaps never witnessed a gathering in which every person present was perfectly happy. A human scene of grandeur, which holds no rival claims, challenges the credulity of all earth-bound men.

Heaven, the unsullied creation of God's love, all rich in variety of scene, infinite in its power of stirring spiritual emotion, and aglow with rapturous delight, is hard for the human mind to conceive. Every believer in Scripture concedes that Paradise is beyond the greatest triumph of all earthly creation; and yet, men fear it. They hold a vague surmise that the solemnity and grandeur of it all might be somewhat wearing to their personal power of endurance throughout eternity. Some have

woven a subconscious notion of Heaven in which there is continuous ceremony in the formal dignity of festive splendor. God is visibly present there, and the gorgeous assembly of the blessed souls and angels form a setting worthy of Heaven. But formal occasions of earth are associated in memory with sensations of physical weariness.

The greatest joys of life are the simplest ones; a personal triumph, a sudden burst of unexpected beauty at the wayside, a consciousness of having given pleasure. These things form the high-lights of life upon earth; they are the vivid joys that remain in memory's treasure longest. There is a pang in the human heart at the thought that, in the reaping of eternal joy, there is no more joy to be made. There is a finality about death that carries the impression of unchanging monotony, thereafter. Then there is the thought of the constant companionship of the saints. It is easy to confuse them, in mind, with the consciously perfect beings whom everyone avoids. But the saints in Dante's Home-land are not critical, even mentally, of the minor citizens of Heaven.

Revelation on the subject of Paradise is meagre and difficult to understand. And, although there is tabernacled, in the heart of every earnest Christian, a hope of Heaven, there

is, with that hope, an awe that holds thought of its realization distant and vague. The soul acts through and in the body; and then, after a brief companionship, surrenders the inert clay to the earth of its origin, and appears at the Great Throne of its God. Granted the spirit to be that of a saint, the soul-deserted body looks like a vanquished thing.

Human vision holds a deeply determining power in the forming of human judgment. The statement of a man's utter bewilderment finds the phrase, "I could not believe my eyes." Three years of intimate association with the mind and miracles of God Himself did not break, in St. Thomas, the habit of deciding through the testimony of the senses. The special beatitude granted "those who have not seen and have believed," [1] is Our Blessed Lord's recognition of the proneness of all humanity to rely on the judgment of vision in the framing of thought. There is floating over the mind of every mortal man the dark, ominous consciousness that Death stands between the best man living and the Heaven of his hope. Dread of the thought of death hinders some from the contemplation of the Great Reward beyond it.

Nothing hindered Dante from the contemplation of anything which he considered worthy

[1] *St. John*, XX, 29.

of contemplation. And though he was conscious of the fact that reason, alone, has wings too short for lofty flight, he applied it where he could compel its service. It is reasonable to believe, without awaiting the word of revelation, that the beauties of earth are but dim pictures of the glory of Heaven. The torrents, and rivers of peace, the blooms, the birds, the dainty fountains, the mountain heights, shouldering the very sky, the quiet vales between them, rich in hidden beauty—they are all in Dante's *Paradiso*. They are not earth-achievements transported into Heaven; they are special creations for the joy of souls that have found their way Home.

The author of the *Commedia* finds a constant analogy between the experiences of earth and those of eternity. He compares the action of God, through and in His creatures, to the action of the human soul through the physical being.

> And as the soul within your dust, through members differing and conformed to divers powers, doth diffuse itself.
>
> so doth the Intelligence deploy its goodness, multiplied through the stars, revolving still on its own unity." [2]

In the Paradise which Dante conceives, the saints love everybody and everything: they are

[2] *Paradiso*, II, 133.

not indifferent to one another while absorbed with the infinite Source of their joys:

I did behold many a countenance, eager to speak.[3]

There is, in Heaven, restful satisfaction to the mind:

> Therein it resteth as a wild beast in his den so soon as it hath reached it; and reach it may; else were all longing futile.
>
> Wherefore there springeth, like a shoot, questioning at the foot of truth; which is a thing that thrusteth us toward the summit, on from ridge to ridge.[4]

There is exchange of ideas, there is still the exercise of personal power, there is the relaxation of abandon without previous weariness or pain. In this way the author answers the worldling's inquiry:

If none do wrong, of what is conversation?
If all is done, what whiles away the time?
What is the joy of rest when one is rested?
Where is the joy of effort with no hills to climb?

And though the souls of Paradise are so transfused with the light and beauty of God as to render them a part of Heaven's beauty, still they retain their personality. Piccarda, Dante's sister-in-law, not only recognizes him, but desires that he look more closely and try to remember her:

[3] *Paradiso*, III, 16. [4] *Ibid.*, IV, 127.

> . . . and if thy
> memory be rightly searched, my greater beauty
> will not hide me from thee.[5]

There are variety and degrees of beauty:

> Clear was it then to me how everywhere in heaven
> is Paradise, e'en though the grace of the chief
> Good doth not rain there after one only fashion.[6]

Justinian introduces himself, tells of his having fallen into heresy and of his conversion, is informed of events upon earth, and finally turns his topic of discussion to Heaven itself. Therein, he says, is joy in even

> . . . the commeasuring of our rewards to our desert.[7]

The souls of the blessed are gratified because they find their own judgment to be in accord with that of God. Thus, in even the lowest circles of Heaven, we find not only peace and beauty of vision but also exercise of the intellect. Further we find the power to observe and to study the very mind of the Creator.

Sameness of award would tend to monotony. Again in this the author finds comparison an aid to the understanding of the appointments in eternity:

> Divers voices upon earth make sweet harmony,
> and so the divers seats in our life render sweet
> harmony amongst these wheels.[8]

[5] *Paradiso*, III, 46.
[6] *Ibid.*, III, 88.
[7] *Ibid.*, VI, 118.
[8] *Ibid.*, VI, 124.

As, in the *Inferno,* pictures were burned into the memory of the reader with words of fire; so in the *Paradiso,* every page is illumined with words of light. The beauty and brilliance of the realms of the planets is suggested through the increased splendor in the appearance of the soul of Beatrice. The pilgrims pass from circle to sphere above, in the heights of Heaven, through an ever brighter and more gorgeous pathway, to the Throne of Peace.

The first seven Heavens have claimed casual references, in preceding chapters. Before leaving the Seventh Heaven, Dante pauses, at the suggestion of Beatrice, to gaze over the spheres through which he has passed. The Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn float in the varied beauty of their several realms.

Very distant, below the moon, is the earth:

> With my sight I turned back through all and every of the seven spheres, and saw this globe such that I smiled at its sorry semblance.
>
> And all the seven were displayed to me, how great they are and swift, and how distant each from other in repair.[9]

In the Stellar Heaven, to which he now ascends, are gathered souls from the spheres below. They meet here freely and disport themselves in gladness:

[9] *Paradiso,* XXII, 133.

> And Beatrice said: "Behold the hosts of Christ's triumph, and all the fruits gathered by the circling of these spheres."
>
> . . . in each recess
> I saw thousands of lamps surmounting, one sun which all and each enkindled, as doth our own the things we see above.[10]

Here the mind of Dante is enlarged beyond the bounds of nature, by miraculous power, in order that he may be enabled to endure the grandeur yet to be viewed by him:

> Even as fire unbarred from the cloud, because it so dilateth that it hath not space within, and counter to its nature dasheth down to earth,
>
> so my mind, grown greater mid these feats, forth issued from itself, and what it then became knoweth not to recall.[11]

Dante feels that the transition from the Seventh Heaven to the circles yet above is more than a step:

> . . . needs must the
> sacred poem make a leap, as who should find his pathway intercepted.[12]

The poet asks the tolerance of his readers if they observe that the weight of the theme should cause his mortal shoulders to tremble beneath the burden. An avalanche of color seems released from the Height of Heights,

[10] *Paradiso,* XXIII, 19.
[11] *Ibid.,* XXIII, 40.
[12] *Ibid.,* XXIII, 61.

and strains of clear strong melody sweep past him like a fragrant breeze. The sudden flood of light blinds the poet. Presently strengthened to endure the beauty of it all, Dante regains the power of vision, and knows that he has been introduced into the distinguished company of the best people of every century since the creation of mankind. The souls retain their personality amid the unearthly beauty and varied splendor of Heaven's living poetry. Dante observes supreme happiness alike in the heart of the lesser saint and that of the giant spirit of the canonized hero of God.

The pilgrim cannot distinguish one from another the pleasurable messages of his bewildered senses; but they compound a throbbing joy gorgeous in wealth of vitality and vibrant with the intensity of the bliss of stalwart saints. The distant echoes of the repeated flourish of trumpets welcoming souls, new born from the dust of death, hold at once a power and a gentleness that explain the mingled awe and joy of those new-freed spirits winging their triumphal way to the welcome of God's eyes. There, in a love rapturously exalted to silent forgetfulness of all things else, do they pause and learn to its eternal fulness what means the Fatherhood of God.

From this height Dante looks afar, as toward

a horizon, and finds his vision extended through the far-flung splendor of God's mighty reach. He looks down upon the planets and the stars; and yet the hugeness of the vast domain destroys not the distinctness of his vision. He witnesses in each distant countenance the delicate tenderness of an ever growing love. Love pervades each fractional space of the whole, like a glowing joy of heart, amid fragrance and music. Buoyant with gladness, souls singing float in a flashing stream of circling exultation to the Throne of Sweet Desire, there to rest in the still passion of peace. At first the poet is shown the Blessed souls illumined by God while yet Divinity is hidden from his vision:

> So beheld I many a throng of splendors, glowed on from above by ardent rays, beholding not the source whence came the glowing.[13]

Then he sees a living torch descend and circle around the Mother of God "in fashion of a crown," [14] and hears such music as makes earth's highest harmony seem but noise:

> Whatever melody soundeth sweetest here below, and most doth draw the soul unto itself, would seem a rent cloud thundering,
>
> compared to the sound of that lyre whereby was crowned the beauteous sapphire by which the brightest Heaven is ensapphired.[15]

[13] *Paradiso*, XXIII, 82.
[14] *Ibid.*, XXIII, 95.
[15] *Ibid.*, XXIII, 97.

Thus is word visibly carried from God by the angels, His royal messengers, to His loved ones in Heaven. And the joy of one is a source of gladness for all:

> Each one of these glowings upstretched with its flame, so that the deep love which they had for Mary was made plain to me.
>
> Then they stayed there within my sight, singing "O Queen of Heaven" so sweetly that ne'er hath parted from me the delight.[16]

The wish of one of their number becomes the command of the others. Beatrice requests the souls to grant Dante a taste of the joy which is theirs constantly, and they comply, as a body, without a moment's hesitancy:

> . . . and those glad souls made
> themselves spheres upon fixed poles, outflaming
> mightily like unto comets . . .
>
> from the one I noted of most beauty, I saw
> issue a so blissful flame it left none there of
> greater brightness;
>
> and thrice around Beatrice did it sweep with
> so divine a song, my fantasy repeateth it not
> to me.[17]

Then after Dante makes such profession of faith as satisfies the Prince of the Apostles,

[16] *Paradiso*, XXXIII, 124. [17] *Ibid.*, XXIV, 10.

> . . . the high holy court made "God we praise" ring through the spheres, in melody such as up there is sung.[18]

Every graceful movement of these celestial spirits renders a symphony of music, and amid harmony of color in the brilliant glow from the High Throne of Love, St. Peter

> blessing me as he sang, three times circled me, so soon as I was silent . . .
> so did I please him in my utterance.[19]

The joys of companionship and mutual appreciation of fellows is witnessed by Dante, when St. James en route to meet the pilgrim pauses with St. Peter:

As when a dove taketh his place near his companion, and the one poureth out his love for the other, circling round and murmuring.

so did I see one great chieftain glorious received by the other, praising the food which there above doth feast them.[20]

Then came St. John and,

> as doth rise—and enter on
> the dance a joyous virgin . . .
>
> so did I see the illumined splendor join the other two, who were wheeling round in such guise as their burning love befitted.
>
> There it launched itself into their music.[21]

[18] *Paradiso*, XXIV, 111.
[19] *Ibid.*, XXIV, 151.
[20] *Ibid.*, XXV, 19.
[21] *Ibid.*, XXV, 103.

And Beatrice, mindful of the intimate privileges earned even on earth by the Beloved Apostle in his association with the Redeemer introduces him thus:

> This is he who lay upon the breast of our Pelican, and this was he chosen from upon the Cross for the great office.[22]

His guide had promised that Dante should meet the Counts of Heaven "in His most secret hall," in order to be able to carry back to earth the wonders and the beauties of the realm. Such promise was no presumption, for every wish is granted a creature who has earned the reward of bliss. These princes of Heaven appeared without delay at the expressed desire of Beatrice.

It is interesting to note the method by which Dante impresses his readers with the greater and greater height of joy which grew with every new experience in Paradise. In Canto XXIII, he tells us that his mind "issued from itself" [23] through the added strength of his human vision with a ray of intensest light which "did dissipate every scale with a ray—that might . . . glow more than a thousand miles." [24] In Canto XXX, after Dante had been robbed of his vision as by

[22] *Paradiso,* XXV, 112.
[23] *Ibid.,* XXIII, 44.
[24] *Ibid.,* XXVI, 76.

> a sudden flash of lightning which so shattereth the visual spirits as to rob the eye of power to realize e'en strongest objects; [25]

a "living light" glowed about him and he felt himself to regain his former clearness of vision through an extended horizon:

> And I saw a light, in river form, glow tawny betwixt banks painted with marvelous spring,
>
> From out this river issued living sparks, and dropped on every side into the blossoms, like rubies set in gold.
>
> Then, as inebriated with the odors, they plunged themselves again into the marvelous swirl, and as one entered issued forth another.[26]

The hunger to know more and more grows with the satisfaction of each new wondrous experience. Beatrice warns Dante against attempting to see the reality behind these symbols until after he has further strengthened himself:

> But of this water needs thou first must drink, ere so great thirst in thee be slaked.[27]

In Canto XXXI, St. Bernard deigns to take the place of Beatrice, as guide, while she, for Dante's pleasure, assumes the high rank due her eminent virtues. He bids Dante strengthen his vision by feasting his eyes on the brilliant beauty of the garden about him:

[25] *Paradiso*, XXX, 46.
[26] *Ibid.*, XXX, 61.
[27] *Ibid.*, XXX, 73.

> . . . for
> gazing on it will equip thy glance better to
> mount through the divine ray.[28]

Finally, in preparation for the Beatific Vision, the poet is warned to

> Look now on the face which is most likened
> Unto Christ; for its brightness, and no other,
> hath power to fit thee to see Christ.[29]

Thus each transcending joy enlarges the capacity of the soul for greater for more sublime experience.

Throughout the *Paradiso,* the poet concentrates his best powers on impressing his conviction that divine contemplation exceeds pleasures of physical sense, even in sweetness. And, while exercise of the highest faculties of the mind lays it under some restraint, it could be rendered capable, even while on earth, of sensing the webs of music that are beyond the present, of feeling the secret mirth of Heaven's joys, of knowing the frail beginnings of the faultless living beauties that tremble in joyous satisfied effort throughout eternity. Dante believed that God dispenses the dew of earth's morning, the stretches of its purple mist amid the mountains, and the gold of summer sunshine as a prefiguring of the supreme joys of Heaven. He believed

[28] *Paradiso,* XXXI, 97. [29] *Ibid.,* XXXII, 85.

that God sets His children amid the fond smile of kindly eyes while on earth, to better fit them for the welcome in their Father's smile when, in triumph, they step from the bark of earthly life to the shores of their Home Land.

In the Primo Mobile, the circle of the angels,

> a point I saw which rayed forth light so keen, needs must the vision that it flamed on be closed because of its strong poignancy.[30]

Pausing, the author is all but overcome with the splendor of the play of color and motion,

> . . . in this wondrous and angelic temple which hath only love and light for boundary.[31]

And there is song struck up by souls of power in blissful gladness:

> song which so far surpasseth our Muses, our Sirens, in those sweet tubes, as the first splendor that which it back throweth. [in reflection]

> As sweep o'er the thin mist two (rain) bows . . . so of those sempiternal roses revolved around us the two garlands, and so the outmost answered to the other.[32]

And thus the souls do homage to one another, sing one another's praises, joy in the grateful review of their own deeds and the triumphs of companion souls. Their happiness is expressed in

[30] *Paradiso,* XXVIII, 16.
[31] *Ibid.,* XXVIII, 53.
[32] *Ibid.,* XII, 7.

> the dance and high great festival,—alike
> of song and flashing light with light; gladsome
> and benign.[33]

There is in Paradise an ever changing quality of scene, without loss of identity. This can be compared to nothing material but a cloud infused with varicolored light, and finding a fresh perfection in each new guise. The scene is entirely within the souls of men. Is there a rainbow, it is formed of souls gathered in the unity of a triumphal song of hope, rewarded. Stiff crowns of heavy metal have no place in Dante's Heaven, nor has aught else of matter; but there is caught the charm of tenderness and purity in a fragile beauty that earth knows not of. Yet these changes are effected with the suddenness of lightning, and the strength of the eagle's wing in flight. Observe the souls as they are borne to realms beyond for other glories:

> As our atmosphere raineth down in flakes the
> frozen vapors when the horn of the heavenly
> Goat is touched by the sun;
>
> so did I see the ether adorn itself and rain up-
> ward the flakes of the triumphant flashes,
> which had made sojourn there with us.[34]

Satan, cold materialism, is lodged in the center of earth in the *Inferno;* so that actions heavy with the greed of matter fall toward him,

[33] *Paradiso,* XII, 22. [34] *Ibid.,* XXVII, 67.

through the natural force of gravity. This we readily understand. By the same law of attraction applied in the *Paradiso,* souls detached from such dross are impelled upward to the spiritual Heart of creation itself. Instead of the living death, found in the *Inferno,* the blessed souls of the saved have a deathless life. They have with life the Creator of life itself in their midst.

It is difficult to realize the exact viewpoint of W. P. Ripon, Doré and others who pronounce the *Inferno* more attractive than the *Paradiso.* The pictures in the *Paradiso* are as vivid, they are certainly more beautiful, more varied and more artistic. Is it that the absence of struggle, the complete peace of Heaven is suggestive of the end of a theme? Is it that custom has trained the reader to release a book on reaching the "happy-ever-after page"? Is it that the ethereal quality of infinite bliss presented as a reality in the *Paradiso* holds the reader in such suspended breathless awe that it is physically tiring? It yet remains for some analyst to discover why this division of the comedy is the least popular of all. The *Inferno* is often explained as the work of an embittered politician; it becomes an interesting study, then, from the angle of a specialist in psychology; but its structure and picture-portrayal make no

more savory feast for the rhetorician than does the *Paradiso*. There is no necessary appeal in the *Inferno* to the faith of the student, once there is conviction that the author, an enraged Italian, found gruesome comfort in its composition.

One must believe in Heaven to enjoy *Il Paradiso*. It is too consistent for insanity, too deep for a weak, superstitious mind, too pulsing with vital hope for insincerity. It stands as a living testimony of the faith of a colossal mind. It is an intricate pattern but so vivid was its realization to the author's mind that he multiplies details of joy. The souls of Saints are pictured delving into mysteries of creation, asking about the unexplained victories of the unjust on earth, drinking the knowledge of God throughout a day that will not end until they tire of it. Angels are there

> and
> their numbers were such as ran into thousands beyond the duplication of the chessboard.
>
> From choir to choir I heard Hosanna sung to that fixed point which holdeth and shall ever hold them to the where in which they have been ever.[35]

The creation of the angels and of the order of the universe, Dante learns was instantaneous; but the angels are permitted to use the elements of creation for the continuous adorning of

[35] *Paradiso*, XXVIII, 91.

Heaven. After the expulsion of the condemned angels:

> the rest abode and began this art which thou perceivest with so great delight that from circling round they ne'er depart.[36]

There is, then, in Paradise not only the triumph of having attained, but the joy of attaining as well; and this has been

> . . . since first they gathered joy
> from the face of God.[37]

Again and again, in the *Paradiso,* Dante gives pause to confess his consciousness of inability to do his subject justice; not from a humble notion of his unworthiness to attempt such a task, but from a sense that his pen is unable to picture the scenes of the utmost reach of his contemplation. Finally, he dares attempt to put the Height of Heights in words. He prepares us for the scenes through the explanation of Beatrice which we are permitted to hear:

> We have issued forth from the
> greatest body into the heaven which is pure light,
>
> light intellectual full-charged with love, love of true good full-charged with gladness, gladness which transcendeth every sweetness.
>
> Here shalt thou see the one and the other soldiery of Paradise, and the one in those aspects thou shalt see at the last judgment.[38]

[36] *Paradiso,* XXIX, 52.
[37] *Ibid.,* XXX, 38.
[38] *Ibid.,* XXIX, 76.

The sudden flood of intense light blinded the poet for a time; but he regained the power of vision, realized that he was in the illustrious company of the best people of every century, and of every experience of earthly conquest. Adam is seen holding "amorous converse with his Maker"; but he cheerfully, aye anxiously, permits himself to be drawn into conversation with the inquiring soul of the poet. "Every where and every when" [39] is the present place and time to celestial minds, for they can see all things focussed in the mirror of God's mind. Eve is seen in the Rose of Paradise, at the feet of the Blessed Mother of God.

All of the souls of the Church Triumphant gather about and within this white rose:

> Like to a swarm of bees which doth one while plunge into the flowers and another while wend back to where its toil is turned to sweetness,
>
> ever descended into the great flower adorned with so many leaves, and reascended thence to where its love doth ceaseless make sojourn.[40]

Angels, too, add their beauty to the scene:

> They had their faces all of living flame, and wings of gold, and the rest so white that never snow reacheth such limit . . .[41]
>
> And at the mid-point, with out stretched wings. I saw more than a thousand angels making festival, each one distinct in glow and art.[42]

[39] *Paradiso*, XXIX, 12.
[40] *Ibid.*, XXXI, 7.
[41] *Ibid.*, XXXI, 13.
[42] *Ibid.*, XXXI, 130.

Children who died before they had opportunity to merit Heaven in their own behalf, are distinguished

> . . . by their faces, and
> also their child voices, if thou look aright, and if thou listen.[43]

Finally, after prayer, Dante is permitted to gaze into the very face of God:

> Thence forward was my vision mightier than our discourse, which faileth at such sight, and faileth memory at so great outrage.
>
> As he who dreaming seeth, and when the dream is gone the passion stamped remaineth, and nought else cometh to the mind again;
>
> even such am I; [44]

And if the pen of the genius trembles at the attempt to express the wonders here observed, let no other mar the picture by attempted praise of the awe-filled scene in the closing Canto:

> In the profound and shining being of the deep light appeared to me three circles, of three colors and one magnitude;
>
> one by the second as Iris by Iris seemed reflected, and the third seemed a fire breathed equally from one and from the other.
>
> Oh but how scant the utterance, and how faint to my conceit! [45]

[43] *Paradiso*, XXXII, 46.
[44] *Ibid.*, XXXIII, 55.
[45] *Ibid.*, XXXIII, 115.

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